

**Tuesday
3 June 2025**

**Volume 768
No. 145**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 3 June 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ROYAL ALBERT HALL BILL [*LORDS*]

Second Reading opposed and deferred until Tuesday 10 June (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Reoffending: Young Offenders

1. **Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce reoffending by young offenders. [904332]

5. **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce reoffending by young offenders. [904337]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The Government are determined to reduce youth reoffending as part of our safer streets mission. Despite the fiscal challenges we inherited, we have increased our core funding to youth offending teams and extended our effective Turnaround programme.

Chris Webb: I thank the Minister for his answer. In a recent survey on the impact of the cost of living on childhood in Blackpool, six in 10 respondents told me that they were worried about children in their care becoming involved in crime or antisocial behaviour. The link between deprivation and crime is clear, and it highlights the urgent need for a dedicated cross-Government strategy to improve the lives of young people in Blackpool and across the country. What steps is the Minister taking, alongside other colleagues in Government, to ensure co-ordinated action to tackle youth crime and reoffending rates in vulnerable communities such as Blackpool?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We are working across Government to tackle the root causes of youth offending. We are also creating the Young Futures programme, which will have prevention partnerships, so that we can intervene earlier. The child poverty taskforce will soon publish a cross-Government strategy for reducing child poverty.

Alex McIntyre: I thank the Minister for his response. It is so important that we break the cycle of reoffending, particularly for young offenders. In Gloucester, we are really lucky to have amazing organisations working with young offenders, including Young Gloucestershire and the Nelson Trust, which offers holistic trauma-informed support for women of all ages. Will the Minister join me on a visit to the Nelson Trust to see the great work being done in my city of Gloucester?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the importance of essential organisations such as Young Gloucestershire and the Nelson Trust. I am grateful for the invitation, and ask him to please write to me about the organisations. We will see what my diary can do.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Somerset Youth Justice Service recently got a “requires improvement” rating from His Majesty’s inspectorate of probation. The situation is clearly damaging young offenders’ chances of rehabilitation, so what steps is the Department taking to improve SYJS and support young offenders in Somerset?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Lady draws attention to an important issue. Inspections are significant in identifying where additional support and effort are needed. The Department will do everything it can to give proper support to Somerset Youth Justice Service.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that probation services in North Down and across the UK often exceed their duties, providing extensive support to individuals in need? Furthermore, does he agree that it is essential to allocate resources for substance abuse treatment, so that young offenders have access to personalised services?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I agree wholeheartedly. It is very important that substance abuse is properly tackled. Probation services and youth offending teams do a lot of work in that space.

Victims of Domestic Abuse and Violence

2. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps she is taking to support survivors of domestic abuse and violence against women through the criminal justice system. [904334]

19. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support victims of domestic abuse. [904351]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The Government are taking action to support victims of domestic abuse and violence. We are ensuring stronger management of domestic abuse perpetrators through new domestic abuse protection orders and the increased multi-agency management of domestic abusers; that is being expanded to those convicted of coercive and controlling behaviour. In response to the sentencing review published last week, I committed to further protections for victims, including the roll-out of domestic abuse specialist courts and better identification of domestic abuse perpetrators.

Sarah Green: My constituent was subject to financial, physical and emotional abuse by her ex. She was also cyber-stalked; her social media accounts were hacked for details of her location, and for information about their children. Despite being granted a non-molestation order and a prohibited steps order, she was unable to compile sufficient evidence of the cyber-stalking to be granted a stalking protection order. Speaking to her, her fear is palpable. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that victims are supported in compiling the evidence that they need for a stalking protection order?

Shabana Mahmood: I am very sorry to hear of the experiences of the hon. Lady's constituent; it is clearly a horrifying case, and my sympathies are with her. Given that stalking protection orders are relatively new, there is a case for continually examining whether their roll-out is working as intended. They are primarily a Home Office responsibility, but there are amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill, which is going through the House, that are designed to strengthen these orders. If the hon. Lady will write to me, I will ensure that she has a meeting with the relevant Minister to talk through the specifics of the case that she has raised, and the lessons that can be learned as we strengthen these orders for everyone.

Marsha De Cordova: In April, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner warned that without additional funding, London will see a sustained increase in violence against women and girls. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been working tirelessly to fix the broken system left by the Conservatives, but if we do not get that support in London, women will go unprotected. Will she commit to working with colleagues in the Home Office and the Treasury to ensure that the Met can keep women safe in my constituency and across London?

Shabana Mahmood: Of course, we work closely with colleagues in the Home Office and the Treasury. The Government will shortly publish the outcome of the spending review, but I can assure my hon. Friend that all colleagues across Government are committed to our mission to halve violence against women and girls, for victims not just in London but across the country. I will ensure that we engage with Members across the House on this matter as well.

Reoffending on Probation

3. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help to reduce reoffending by people on probation. [904335]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): We inherited a justice system in crisis, with prisons churning out better criminals, not better citizens, and we know that 80% of offenders are reoffenders. Last week, I announced measures to toughen up community punishment, which results in lower reoffending rates than short custodial sentences. We will also increase probation investment to manage offenders in the community safely.

Warinder Juss: Will the Lord Chancellor outline the steps being taken to recruit and retain probation officers, and to ensure that they have manageable caseloads and that their morale is improved? What programmes or partnerships are in place to help those on probation to access stable accommodation, and employment, training or education, so that they can go through the rehabilitation process and reduce their chances of reoffending?

Shabana Mahmood: We are investing in probation. Funding will increase by £700 million by the final year of the spending review. That is a 45% increase in annual budgets, which will fund further recruitment on top of the 1,300 officers we will recruit this year and the 1,000 officers we recruited in the previous year. That will support our investment in services that rehabilitate offenders and cut crime.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Lord Chancellor admitted in a recent interview with *The Times* that her sentencing reforms will create "inevitable tensions" with the Government's efforts to halve knife crime and rates of violence against women and girls. It sounds like she does not really believe in these reforms, which have been trotted out by David Gauke, the Prisons Minister in the other place and the Prison Reform Trust. Does the Lord Chancellor realise that none of them is elected, and that if this package fails to keep our streets safe and restore the criminal justice system, the country will hold her and this Government to account?

Shabana Mahmood: I think the country will hold to account those responsible for the absolute mess that this Government inherited. Nowhere in the right hon. Gentleman's question did he acknowledge that under the Government of which he was a member and for which he campaigned, prisons were brought to the brink of collapse. These reforms are necessary. This Government will not allow our prisons to run out of places—the one thing everybody agrees we cannot allow to happen. The only reason that is a possibility is because of the Tory party.

Locked Child Trust Funds

4. **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): When the Minister of State for Courts and Legal Services plans to meet the hon. Member for Horsham's constituent Andrew Turner to discuss locked child trust funds. [904336]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): I am well aware of the hon. Gentleman's campaign to support young adults who lack mental capacity in accessing their child trust fund. I know that he met my predecessor, and following work that I am carrying out with counterparts in other Departments, I will be very pleased to meet him.

John Milne: My constituent has been through no fewer than eight Justice Secretaries, looking for a solution to the problem of locked child trust funds; he has had to start over again each time from scratch. Will the Minister give me and Mr Turner a clear understanding of what exactly the legal impediment is to a solution, and of what part of Government the objection is coming from, so that we can make a legal challenge to it, if necessary?

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Member will understand, as will Mr Turner, that we have to balance the desire to support young adults who lack capacity in accessing what is their property by right with the need to ensure that everybody who needs to access those child trust funds has the proper legal authority to do so. Safeguards need to be in place, not least to ensure that those vulnerable adults are protected from economic abuse. That is why we must work very carefully across Government to ensure that those protections are kept in place.

Community Accommodation Service: Tier 3

6. **Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to ensure adequate monitoring of the community accommodation service tier 3. [904338]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We inherited a system in which far too many people leave prison with no fixed address. Individuals in community accommodation service tier 3 are risk-assessed by probation and subject to ongoing monitoring. Suppliers work closely with probation to deal robustly with any behavioural concerns posed by residents.

Helen Maguire: Thanet House in Leatherhead has rightly been withdrawn from the CAS3 scheme following serious concerns, including about drug dealing, antisocial behaviour and safeguarding risks. Despite raising my constituents' concerns numerous times, I have received no response from the probation delivery unit. Will the Secretary of State ensure that robust monitoring and clear accountability are in place across all CAS3 properties, and commit to ensuring that the Probation Service responds promptly to concerns raised by MPs and local residents?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: It is important that the Probation Service deals with any concerns promptly and effectively. The Department wrote to the hon. Lady on 20 April with further details in relation to her concerns, and Thanet House was withdrawn from the scheme on 20 May.

Violent Offenders: Early Release

7. **Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): What discussions she has had with victims' groups on the early release of violent offenders. [904339]

14. **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): What discussions she has had with victims groups on the early release of violent offenders. [904346]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): A victims' representative was on the panel that conducted the independent sentencing review, which gathered views from victims and survivors. I personally met a number of victims and victim groups and fed their views directly back to David Gauke. Those serving sentences for more serious sexual and violent offences will spend at least 50% of their sentence in custody.

Joy Morrissey: The Victims' Commissioner says that the early release of prisoners risks victim safety, so will the Lord Chancellor explain why she is putting violent offenders ahead of victims?

Alex Davies-Jones: That is not the case. What would be failing victims is if our criminal justice system got to the point of collapse and we did not have prison places for violent offenders. This Government are getting on with reforming our criminal justice system. We are putting victims at the heart of it to protect them, and are making sure that we never run out of prison places again.

Esther McVey: The Prisoners (Disclosure of Information about Victims) Act 2020, otherwise known as Helen's law, should prevent the early release of murderers who do not disclose the location of their victims' remains. However, there are loopholes in the law in cases where the murderer makes a disclosure but no remains are found, as happened in the case of Jean Taylor's daughter, Chantel. Will the Minister meet me and Jean Taylor, who founded the charity Families Fighting for Justice, to close those loopholes?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the right hon. Member for her question. All my sympathies go to her constituent. If she wants to write to me with the details, I will definitely look into the case and come back to her.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The previous Government released prisoners in an indiscriminate way. This Government have developed a more organised approach, but the progression model of sentencing, recommended by the independent sentencing review and welcomed by the Government, could mean less clarity for victims about when perpetrators leave prison. Given the concern expressed by victims' groups, what safeguards and resources will the Minister put in place to prepare victims and assure them of their safety?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee for that important question. It is vital that victims be notified. That is why we are boosting probation and ensuring that victim liaison officers have that vital information. He will be aware that in our Victims and Courts Bill, which has been presented to this House, we are introducing a new victim notification scheme, and a dedicated helpline to ensure that victims get the vital information that they so desperately need.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): In March, I met people from the Justice for Victims campaign group. One family told me that their young daughter was killed by an unlicensed, uninsured driver. They were asked to alter their victim impact statement several times to avoid offending the defendant and were denied the chance to fully express their grief. That experience is shared by many others. Will the Justice Secretary take steps to ensure that victims' families have full autonomy over their statements, so that they can express their experiences freely in court?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I also had the privilege of meeting those families in March, and I heard their concerns. I know personally how important victim personal statements

are to ensuring that victims' and families' voices are heard. I do not want there to be any circumstances in which they feel unable to make a statement. However, these statements are considered evidence, and the rules of admissibility apply, as they do to all witness statements. That is a matter for the courts, but we will keep looking at the issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Justice Secretary.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Can I first say how sorry I was to hear that the Minister was the subject of intimidation and an attack on her office? I think all of us across the House would like to wish her and her staff well, and to say how pleased we are that the vile individuals behind this have been caught and punished.

In September, the Justice Secretary designed an early release scheme for prisoners. She let out Lawson Natty, who supplied the machete used to kill a 14-year-old, and Adam Andrews, who shook a baby so violently that he was left blind and paralysed. She is now halving prison sentences for killers and rapists, while Lucy Connolly remains behind bars for a reprehensible but swiftly deleted tweet. Does the Justice Secretary really believe that her choices are making the public safer?

Alex Davies-Jones: This Government are making choices to keep this country safer, and are cleaning up the mess left after the previous Government led our criminal justice system to rack and ruin. They left this Government to make the difficult decisions, when we came into office, that were necessary to prevent the total collapse of our criminal justice system. It is worth reminding the House again, because the Conservatives seem to have very short memories, that they only built an additional 500 prison places. This Government are rolling up our sleeves and getting on with the difficult job of building the prison places necessary to keep violent offenders in prison, while putting victims back at the heart of our criminal justice system.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Between October 2023 and June 2024, the last Conservative Government released 10,083 offenders under their early release scheme, and refused to exempt domestic abusers from early release, to the horror of survivors and victims charities. The Government have made no such exclusion from their early release scheme so far, but they have the chance to put that right via the new domestic abuse identifier that they are introducing after lots of campaigning by the Liberal Democrats and others. Will the Minister today give survivors and victims charities a commitment that as soon as the identifier comes into force, it will be used to exempt domestic abusers from early release, in the way that the last Government failed to?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Member for pointing out the failures of the previous Government, and their refusal to exempt domestic abusers and offenders who have committed violence against women and girls from their early release scheme; this Government ensured that measures were in place to ensure that victims were kept safe. He will know the importance of the new domestic abuse identifying tool that we are bringing forward. It is a vital for identifying and tracking data

through the criminal justice system, and it will be important as we go forward with the reviews that we are putting in place.

High Street Crime

8. Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): If her Department will take steps to increase sentences for high street crime. [904340]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): This Government inherited a situation in which 10% of offenders account for 50% of all offences, with a small number of repeat offenders wreaking havoc in our communities and on our high streets. Cracking down on these offenders is a central part of any successful strategy to cut crime, and we will accept David Gauke's recommendations, particularly on the further roll-out of intensive supervision courts. However, the hon. Member must accept the reality of the inheritance left by his Government, which included an increase in sentences although they delivered only 500 prison places over their 14 years in power.

Stuart Anderson: South Shropshire residents would expect high street crime to be dealt with, and proportionate sentencing and appropriate deterrents. How will removing short-term prison sentences achieve any of that?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member should know that 60% of all people who are given a short custodial sentence go on to reoffend within the year, so clearly the system that we have does not work. We cannot simply sit back and keep doing things that we know result in increased reoffending in communities that we all want to protect. We have to look at interventions that will make a difference. Tough community punishment produces better reductions in reoffending than short sentences. We will consult Members across the House as we prepare our Bill in the coming weeks to make sure that we have a strong package of unpaid work and other measures designed to toughen up community punishment.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Does the Lord Chancellor agree that when it comes to sentencing, ancillary orders, including those banning offenders from shops and high streets, are part of the answer? We need the police, together with the Crown Prosecution Service, to apply for them, and when an offender appears in court, we need the courts to issue those orders when sentencing.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He is right that so-called ancillary orders, often referred to as travel bans, bans from seeing football and bans on the ability to go to particular areas, are an important part of the package of measures that the Gauke review has recommended. We have accepted those in principle and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and other colleagues as we draw up our package of proposals for the upcoming sentencing Bill.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Whatever the sentence or offence, victims and families deserve a meaningful and fair route to appeal sentences that are unduly lenient. Twenty-eight days for people who have

experienced deep trauma, when criminals get an unlimited time to appeal, is not meaningful or fair. Can the Lord Chancellor explain to campaigners such as Katie Brett and Ayse Hussein from Justice for Victims why she is not willing to give them more time?

Shabana Mahmood: The shadow Minister should know that the Law Commission is considering the whole area of unduly lenient sentencing. It is important that we let it do its work and that it is able to look at the measures in the round and think about the consequences across the whole criminal justice system. We will review those proposals once they are made and legislate if we need to.

Dr Mullan: I am afraid that that explanation will not wash. The Lord Chancellor knows that she is choosing to give the Government more time in her Bill ahead of the Law Commission's decision. Why is she giving herself more time, but not victims?

Shabana Mahmood: If the shadow Minister ever did any homework, he would know that it is always the Attorney General who has to agree and sign off on unduly lenient sentencing referrals. Our proposals are there to make sure that the Attorney General always has a full 28-day period to consider and make rulings that often help victims. He will also know that the Law Commission is looking at that work. The Conservative Government had 14 years; why did they never do anything?

Victims of Sexual Abuse

9. **Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support victims of sexual abuse. [904341]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): We fund key support services, such as independent sexual violence and domestic abuse advisers. The Crown Prosecution Service has introduced victim liaison officers to ensure that victims of rape and serious sexual offences have a consistent point of contact throughout the criminal justice system. We will also provide free transcripts of sentencing remarks for victims of rape and serious sexual offences, and we will introduce independent legal advisers for all adult rape victims.

Tim Roca: On the last Government's watch, the backlog of Crown court cases rose to record levels, leaving too many victims, including those in Macclesfield, to wait years for their day in court. That backlog included victims of sexual abuse, unable to begin properly processing their trauma until their trial is over and stuck in a horrifying limbo. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that victims of sexual abuse are not left waiting for years to see justice done?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is right. As the House knows, justice delayed is justice denied. That is why this Government have doubled magistrate sentencing powers and funded a record number of sitting days. However, the scale of the challenge is beyond what increased sitting days can achieve alone. That is why we have asked Sir Brian Leveson to propose bold and ambitious reforms to deliver swifter justice for victims as part of the Government's plan for change.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): In recent weeks, Daniel Clarke, a vile sexual offender, was sentenced to seven years in prison for horrific acts of sexual abuse against six vulnerable children, many with special needs and many of whom are my constituents; indeed, there are 81 suspected cases. I have been contacted by the families of those innocent victims, who have expressed outrage at the shockingly lenient sentence. I wrote to the Attorney General on 20 May asking for the case and the sentence to be reviewed. I did not receive a response and had to find out through the BBC that the review was happening. Nevertheless, I am pleased that the sentence is being reviewed. Will the Minister give assurances to my constituents, the House and the British public that such vile sexual predators will have the book thrown at them and that protecting our children is the only thing that matters?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Member for raising that case. I am pleased that the review is taking place. Victims of child sexual abuse are victims of some of the most heinous crimes in our society. That is why it is important that we get on with addressing the recommendations of the Alexis Jay review. We are putting measures in our Crime and Policing Bill and strengthening the Victims and Courts Bill to ensure that victims of such crimes are put at the heart of the criminal justice system and that the perpetrators feel the full force of the law.

Protesters: Sentencing

10. **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of reviewing sentencing for peaceful protesters. [904342]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): It is a long-standing tradition in this country that people are free to peacefully protest and demonstrate their views provided they do so within the law. When people break the law, sentencing is a matter for the courts, which have a range of powers to deal with offenders effectively and appropriately.

Dr Opher: Peaceful protest is a cornerstone of a functioning and healthy democracy, but people in Stroud and across the country felt that the legislation passed by the Conservatives in 2022 limited the right to peacefully protest. One of my constituents, Adam Beard, with whom I have worked for over five years in my GP surgery, was convicted and sentenced to a year in prison for planning a peaceful protest. Given all the prison overcrowding, will the Minister consider whether peaceful protesters could at least avoid custodial sentences?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The right to peacefully protest is a cornerstone of our democracy, as my hon. Friend rightly says, and this Government will protect and preserve that right. The post-legislative scrutiny of the Public Order Act 2023 began this month, and we will carefully consider the results of that review, along with the recommendations of the independent sentencing review.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): While we might not agree with their methods, peaceful protests can take many forms, including the burning of religious

texts. Does the Minister agree that freedom of expression must be protected and that any move by Parliament or the courts to introduce a blasphemy law would undermine it?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member will be reassured to know that we do not have a blasphemy law in this country, and that is the right and proper position.

Weddings: Humanist Celebrants

11. **Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): If she will take steps to allow humanist celebrants to conduct legally binding weddings. [904343]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Humanists have long campaigned to conduct legally binding weddings, and we are grateful for the contribution they make to our society. Marriage is an important institution and we have to consider any changes carefully. The Government will set out our position on weddings reform in due course.

Siân Berry: I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I understand that Ministers are focused on wider marriage reform, but there is a much quicker and simpler process by which to enable humanist marriages, which is to act on the High Court ruling of 2020 that the current law is discriminatory. Will Ministers therefore lay an order so that humanist couples and celebrants can have legal recognition for their ceremonies in line with their beliefs, the same as their religious counterparts?

Alex Davies-Jones: No one will be more excited to don a hat for the first legally binding humanist wedding than me. However, we must consider whether legislating to provide for humanist marriage would introduce further differential treatment in this complex area of law. That is why we need to make sure that we take the time to get this right. It would also not address other issues in marriage law that affect all groups. As a responsible Government, we have to consider this before we set out our position. I appreciate that means that the hon. Lady will have to wait just a little bit longer.

HMP Lewes

12. **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support the operation of HMP Lewes. [904344]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Since the disappointing inspection in 2023, healthcare improvement funding has been put in place, as has mobile phone detection equipment to disrupt illicit activity. HMP Lewes's most recent inspection in 2024 was encouraging and highlighted the strengths of the invigorated leadership team. His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service is continuing to closely monitor and support the prison.

James MacCleary: The latest inspection of HMP Lewes found that levels of violence, self-harm and drug use remain notably worse than at other reception prisons, with just one third of prisoners engaged in education or employment and many spending as little as two hours a day out of their cells. While the new governor has been praised for making some real improvements, the prison

is still described as being "trapped in a cycle" of boredom, short-staffing and drug misuse. What specific steps are the Government taking to support the governor's efforts, to ensure that these early improvements can be turned into lasting change?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: It is important that HMPPS continues to monitor the prison carefully, and the chief operating officer's visit on 7 May found a number of further improvements. If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me, I can send him a full update on the actions being taken in relation to that prison.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): On the topic of prison operations, we need effective scrutiny of privatised contracts for prison maintenance because those contracts have been detrimental for prisons. Will the Minister release the last Government's report recommending more privatisation of prison maintenance, suitably redacted if necessary, for full transparency and to avoid any accusations of a cover-up?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend will be well aware that a lot of the information is commercially confidential, but we are investing up to £300 million in 2025-26 to keep our prisons safe and secure, and we have a prison estate conditions survey programme in place to better understand our estate.

Prisons: Rehabilitation

13. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of rehabilitative programmes in prisons. [904345]

15. **Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of rehabilitative programmes in prisons. [904347]

18. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of rehabilitative programmes in prisons. [904350]

24. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the potential merits of increasing support for rehabilitation programmes. [904356]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): A key priority of this Government is that our prisons rehabilitate offenders, making them better citizens rather than better criminals. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the fantastic prison staff, who mentor and support prisoners in custody every day. I saw at first hand the benefit of the creating future opportunities programme when I visited HMP Humber in April.

Dr Chambers: Prisons have an important role in protecting the public and punishing criminals, but they are also vital to rehabilitation. Given that around half of prisoners reoffend within a year of being released, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that programmes to address mental health, addiction and education are not only available, but effective and consistently delivered across the prison estate, including in our prison in Winchester?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member is right to emphasise all those programmes. They are clearly extremely important, and we publish and monitor a range of performance metrics linked to rehabilitative programme delivery, including employment at six weeks and six months post-release, or at the start of a community order, and engagement with substance misuse treatment. All those measures are in place and are properly monitored, but as always, there is more to be done in this area.

Susan Murray: In my constituency of Mid Dunbartonshire, the community justice team are having some success in preventing reoffending by working with offenders in a trauma-informed way. Given the success of that trauma-informed approach to rehabilitation, what discussions has the Minister had regarding the differing approaches that are taken to offender rehabilitation across the UK?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member is right to highlight the good work going on in her constituency. As I said, I saw trauma-informed activity in operation at HMP Humber. It is something we need to learn from across the prison estate.

Alison Bennett: Dyslexia is vastly over-represented in the prison population. While 10% of the general population are dyslexic, it is thought that as many as half of all prisoners have dyslexia. Does the Minister consider rehabilitation programmes to effectively meet the specific needs of dyslexic prisoners?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member is right to highlight dyslexia, and neurodiversity is common among people in our prisons. That is why we have neurodiversity officers in each prison to ensure that we are doing our very best for these people so that they can be rehabilitated and become better citizens when they come out of prison.

Caroline Voaden: The former chief inspector of prisons said that LandWorks in my constituency

“provides one of the best examples in the country of how we can reduce reoffending, turn lives around and prevent future victims.”

Its reoffending rate is just 6%. The Government have announced £2.3 billion towards prison builds over the next two years. When will they commit to investing in projects like LandWorks that can radically reduce the prison population, transform the lives of offenders and cut crime?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Third sector organisations like LandWorks deliver valuable rehabilitation, wellbeing support and advocacy services across England and Wales, and they partner effectively with HMPPS in many different ways. The work of key organisations like the one the hon. Member mentions is incredibly important and essential in reducing reoffending, and we continue to invest in it. I would be happy to meet her to discuss the matter further and see what more can be done.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Lack of work is a key driver of reoffending. Derby medical manufacturing company Pennine Healthcare has some offenders who work for the company on day release, but it is exploring a project to manufacture in prisons, providing skills and potential work on release. Does the Minister agree that, rather than the continuing revolving

door of reoffending, we need to ensure that there is both punishment and meaningful rehabilitation? May I invite the Minister to visit and learn more about the project?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend highlights yet another piece of excellent work that is going on across our prison estate in partnership with other organisations. Again, if she writes to me, I would be happy to allow my diary manager to see how my diary is performing.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The north-east charity Nepacs runs departure lounges across prisons in the north-east, including at HMP Holme House, which serves Teesside. Its work is critical in giving prison leavers a central point of support to prevent reoffending and help them reintegrate into society, but the Probation Service has cut its funding and it faces closure. Will the Minister meet me to talk about how the increased funding that we are providing to the Probation Service can be used to protect this vital service?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend highlights another excellent piece of work that is going on, and the difficulties in ensuring that funding is effectively used as we move forward in a difficult situation due to the funding inheritance that we had from the previous Government. If he writes to me about that particular case, I will be very happy to meet him.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Prison has two purposes: rehabilitation and punishment. We need offenders to pay back to the communities and individuals they have harmed. I welcome my hon. Friend's actions to punish offenders in the community. Can I give him a list of all the potholes that need filling in Norfolk?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend can write to me with his list of potholes, and we will see what we can do.

Immigration Offences: Sentencing

16. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Sentencing Council on sentencing guidelines for immigration offences.

[904348]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): Ministers meet regularly with the chair of the Sentencing Council. On the specific guidelines for immigration offences, the hon. Member will know that they set a minimum sentence, but no maximum. Judges can still sentence as they see fit within the limits of what the law allows, and foreign criminals can still be deported, even if they are sentenced to less than 12 months.

David Simmonds: As the shadow Justice Secretary heard when he visited on Friday, criminal gangs are imposing a significant cost on Hillingdon, which has the highest level of asylum seekers per capita of any local authority, because the council has to support asylum seekers who have been smuggled into the UK. What plans does the Justice Secretary have to ensure that we have tougher sentences that are fit for purpose, so that our communities do not face this burden in the future?

Shabana Mahmood: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I and colleagues in the Justice Department are working closely with our colleagues in the Home Department to make sure that we have a joined-up approach to tackling the issues he has raised. He knows that asylum is primarily a policy issue for the Home Secretary, and I will make sure that she and her team are made aware of the specific problems in Hillingdon that he has raised today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Justice Secretary.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): For the first time, the Sentencing Council has published immigration sentencing guidelines. They water down sentences passed by Parliament, which means that hundreds of illegal migrants every year will avoid the threshold for automatic deportation. Once again, the Justice Secretary's officials were in the meeting and waved the guidelines through, and I have the minutes to prove it. Has the Justice Secretary lost control of her Department once again, or is it the case that, as the Defence Secretary said on Sunday, this Government have simply "lost control" of our borders?

Shabana Mahmood: No; what this Government are doing is cleaning up the almighty mess left to us by the previous Government, of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member. He knows full well that I have already signalled an intention to review the powers of the Sentencing Council. We have an upcoming sentencing Bill, and I will take the action that he and his Government never did in 14 long years. *[Interruption.]* He has suddenly found his voice—he did not have it for a decade or more.

Imprisonment for Public Protection: Sentencing

17. **Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD):** What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of the third report of the Justice Committee of Session 2022-23 on IPP sentences, HC 266, published on 22 September 2022. [904349]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We continue to support IPP offenders through our updated action plan, which contributed to a 9% decrease in IPP offenders in prison in the last year, but we will not put public protection at risk. The Prisons Minister in the other place and I continue to meet regularly with MPs, peers and other stakeholders to work together on supporting this cohort.

Tessa Munt: It is 12 and a half years since IPP sentences were described as "not defensible" and were abolished for offenders, but 2,852 people remain incarcerated under these sentences—just 74 fewer than in June 2022. When the Justice Committee reported in 2022, its key recommendation was that the Government legislate to enable a resentencing exercise for these individuals. Will the Minister please set up an expert committee to at least advise on how to bring forward a resentencing exercise urgently?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: It is right and proper that IPP sentences were abolished. Various organisations have considered resentencing. None of them has identified

an approach that would not involve releasing offenders whom the Parole Board has determined pose too great a risk to the public. We do not wish to give false hope to those serving the sentence by establishing an expert panel, but we will continue to work robustly with this group and do everything in our power to address the problem that we recognise.

Employment: Ex-offenders

20. **Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to help support ex-offenders into employment. [904352]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): This Government's plan to support women is clear and ambitious. The aim is to reduce the number of women going to prison. Our Women's Justice Board will support that. The independent sentencing review's recommendations—*[Interruption.]* I am on the wrong question; apologies. *[Interruption.]* Well, you got a preview of the next answer, Mr Speaker.

We are committed to ensuring that offenders leave prison with the jobs and skills needed to lead law-abiding lives. That is why we have launched regional employment councils, which for the first time bring businesses together with prisons, probation and the Department for Work and Pensions to support offenders in the community.

Patrick Hurley: We got there eventually! Employment is crucial to reducing reoffending, and data shows that offenders who are employed within six weeks of leaving prison have a reoffending rate around half of those out of work. Will the Minister outline how the regional employment councils, including in Southport and the Liverpool city region at large, will help to drive down reoffending?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that securing employment is known to reduce the risk of reoffending significantly. The Minister for prisons in the other place has led a business with a track record of getting offenders into employment, and I understand that National Highways is starting to build strong partnerships as chair of the employment councils in Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. To help offenders into employment, they need to have the opportunity of training while in prison, and whenever they leave prison to go back into the societies where they live they need someone there to oversee them and ensure they are following the right path. Will the Minister outline how the Government will ensure that that is the case? He is a good Minister, so will he share his ideas with the policing and justice Minister in Northern Ireland, to ensure that the good things that happen here can happen in Northern Ireland as well?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I am very happy to share good practice across Northern Ireland and other regions of the UK, so that we can all learn from one another, and officials meet in the five nations group, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. He is right to say that we need to ensure that people are supported as they move into the community. That is why we are investing in probation,

as my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor said, onboarding more than 1,000 probation officers this year and another 1,300 next year.

Female Offenders

21. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to support female offenders. [904353]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): My hon. Friend has had a preview of this answer! This Government's plan to support women is clear and ambitious. The aim is to reduce the number of women going to prison. Our Women's Justice Board will support that. The independent sentencing review's recommendations on short, deferred and suspended sentences for women, which we have accepted in principle, will reduce the number of women in prison. We have also taken decisive action by immediately accepting Susannah Hancock's recommendation no longer to place women in young offenders institutions.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Minister for his preview. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women affected by the criminal justice system, I welcome the independent sentencing review's final report. I note that the review encourages the Government to consider introducing statutory defences for victims of domestic abuse, including where coercion has been a factor in their offending, to prevent unnecessarily criminalising them. Will the Government look further at those proposals?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Yes, the Government will look further at those proposals. The Women's Justice Board has been created to do exactly that sort of work, and we also have an excellent Victims Minister in my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones).

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): In March, the Government announced that girls will no longer be placed in young offenders institutions. How will the Minister monitor the implementation of that policy, and how will he ensure the public are protected from the small number of violent girls who need to be detained?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Every week I get a report of the number of girls in our youth estate, so I am monitoring it. There are no girls in a YOI, and there have not been since the girl who was in a YOI moved out soon after we came into government.

Topical Questions

T1. [904382] **Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): I know the House shares my anger at recent attacks against prison officers. After the awful events at HMP Frankland, I commissioned a review into the use of protective body armour, and today I can announce that I will mandate its use in close supervision centres, separation centres, and segregation units in the high security estate. That is my initial response to the review, but I will set out further action

on body armour in due course. When Jonathan Hall's independent review into the Frankland attacks reports, I will take any further steps necessary to protect our brave staff.

Crime must be punished, but on the rare occasions that a miscarriage of justice has taken place, the Criminal Cases Review Commission exists to uncover and rectify that injustice. In recent years the commission has lost the trust of the public. It must now win it back, so today I have appointed Dame Vera Baird, a former Victims' Commissioner, to be its interim chair. She will review the commission, its governance and leadership, and ensure that it delivers once more for those who have been victims of injustice.

Susan Murray: What discussions have the Government had regarding the International Court of Justice's 2024 judgment on Israel and Palestine?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Lady will know that that is a matter primarily for the Foreign Secretary. We keep under review all judgments of all courts, domestic and international, and adopt our policy position accordingly. I will ensure that her concerns, if there are any, are raised directly with the Foreign Secretary.

T4. [904385] **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): The 14,500 volunteer magistrates who deal with 95% of criminal cases are the backbone of our justice system. Will the Lord Chancellor meet me, the Magistrates' Association, and a group of cross-party MPs who recently wrote to her, calling for a long-service medal to be established for justices, as well as discussing the Magistrates' Association's forthcoming report on how to recruit and retain magistrates, as she increases their powers and responsibilities?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): I was pleased to visit Telford justice centre with my hon. Friend, where we met magistrates and leaders of the Magistrates' Association. I meet the Magistrates' Association regularly. We have a system of certification, acknowledging the vital work that magistrates do, especially long-serving magistrates who serve more than 10, 20 or 30 years. I am happy to continue discussions with my hon. Friend on how we can acknowledge and recognise that brilliant service even more.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Brave prison officers are under attack, and I am warning again that, if the Government do not act now, an officer will be killed on the Justice Secretary's watch. After the Southport killer, Axel Rudakubana, allegedly attacked an officer with boiling water, he is now bingeing on treats such as Maltesers and Pringles. When will the Justice Secretary strip Rudakubana and monsters like him of those privileges and put them in solitary confinement? When will she finally have the backs of all our brave prison officers, by giving each and every one the protection that they need in the form of high-collar, stab-proof vests, and not just a privileged few in the most limited circumstances?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me give the shadow Secretary of State a much-needed education, because he appears not to know that under the Tory Government violence

on staff in our prisons soared and experienced officers left in droves because of it. That is the inheritance I received, and that is the mess that this Government are clearing up. He will know that I have already acted on suspending the use of self-cook facilities, and Jonathan Hall is looking into the HMP Frankland attack. I have made the announcement on body armour, and I will not hesitate to take any further action, but unlike him I will not take “headline-grabbing” measures, just for the sake of a headline.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to both Front Benchers that Back Benchers also have to get in? Topical questions have to be short and punchy. Please, let us stick to the script. If the right hon. Member wants to ask longer questions, he should come in earlier—I could have picked the questions where he could have been brought in.

Robert Jenrick: Last month, nine countries wrote to the Council of Europe calling for urgent reform of the European convention on human rights to tackle the migration crisis. The UK was conspicuously absent, and instead the Attorney General has likened critics of the ECHR to the Nazis. The Justice Secretary is reported in the press to find Lord Hermer “very frustrating”, and “personally unbearable”. Well, Mr Speaker, we might have found an area of cross-party consensus, but why did the Justice Secretary not sign the letter? Are the Government irrelevant, or are she and the Prime Minister defending a broken system?

Shabana Mahmood: Again, if the shadow Secretary of State ever paid any attention to detail, he would know that that letter was sent by EU member states and we are no longer a member of the European Union. Let me assure him that I am absolutely committed to considering the wider picture of our human rights law and I will not hesitate to take action where I need to.

T7. [904388] **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): The backlog of Crown court cases in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight reached an eight-year high last year, which has had a huge impact on victims and defendants in Aldershot and Farnborough who are struggling to get on with their lives. What steps is the Minister taking to reduce delays in local justice for my constituents?

Sarah Sackman: This Government inherited record and rising backlogs. As my hon. Friend described, the human cost of that is victims waiting longer and longer for their day in court. We have acted swiftly, increasing magistrates’ sentencing powers, but fundamental reform is needed, which is why we asked Sir Brian Leveson to undertake his review. He will be reporting shortly and we will take his package of fundamental reforms forward, to ensure that we have reform of our Crown courts and swifter justice for victims.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrat party.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree with the chair of the Prison Governors’ Association that the Conservative proposal to arm prison officers with lethal weapons is just “headline-grabbing nonsense”? Does she agree that, on top of providing

body armour, the serious means to protect prison officers is by ensuring that they get the years’ long training they deserve, not the weeks’ long crash course that the last Government left them with?

Shabana Mahmood: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Again, people who pay attention to the detail will know that there are already mutual aid agreements in place between prisons and local police forces to ensure that if an armed response is required, it is available.

T8. [904389] **Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I am sure that hon. Members from all parties will be looking forward to Olivia’s law, in memory of Olivia Pratt-Korbel, coming into force, thanks to a huge amount of support from my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley), Olivia’s family and other families. What else can be done to ensure that murderers, rapists and other violent criminals are forced to answer in court for their crimes?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I thank my hon. Friend for that vital question. We are giving judges the statutory power to order offenders to attend their sentencing hearings. We are also making it clear that reasonable force can be used, where it is necessary and proportionate to do so, to ensure that any adult offender attends when ordered to do so. I pay tribute to the families of Jan Mustafa, Zara Aleena and Sabina Nessa, as well as to the family of Olivia Pratt-Korbel, who have all fought tirelessly to bring about this law. This is a law for all of the victims and it is in their memory that we bring it forward.

T2. [904383] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Across my constituency I hear the same thing from parents, school staff and youth workers: early signs of offending behaviour are often missed or not acted on until it is too late; and in rural areas, stretched services and limited access to youth provision make the problem worse. Given the success of the Haslemere youth hub, will the Lord Chancellor consider expanding community-based justice schemes to ensure young people are not drawn into the criminal justice system when they do not need to be?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The hon. Gentleman is right that those sorts of schemes are exactly what are needed. That is why we have increased funding for youth offending teams and protected funding for the Turnaround scheme, which is highly successful in moving people who are on the edge of youth crime away from crime. We are continuing with that funding and we have the Young Futures prevention partnerships coming in.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): A constituent who came to see me recently was significantly impacted by finding out about the release of somebody who had perpetrated a non-violent but heinous crime against him. What more can we do to ensure that all victims are notified when the perpetrator is released?

Alex Davies-Jones: My sympathies are with my hon. Friend’s constituent. It is vital that victims are notified. Those victims who are currently eligible for the victim notification scheme should be given a victim liaison

officer to find out about their cases, but we know that there is more to do. We are bringing forward a new victim notification scheme in our Victims and Courts Bill, which will for the first time provide a dedicated helpline to get such information to victims and survivors.

T3. [904384] Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): The Secretary of State recently announced that paedophiles will be castrated ahead of early release from prison, which turns out to be nothing more than taking some pills that may—I repeat “may”—reduce their libido. Will the Secretary of State confirm here and now that no paedophile prisoner will be released from prison early until it has been proven that the medication has effectively castrated them?

Shabana Mahmood: Chemical suppression is a mechanism used by other jurisdictions around the world, and it has been shown to work. The previous Government sat on a pilot for years on end and did nothing. I have said that I will pull every lever at our disposal to deal with sex offending once and for all.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): A family court judge who would have made decisions in relation to many abused children was recently found guilty by the High Court of abusing their own adopted children. Does the Minister agree that protecting the anonymity of members of the judiciary who have abused their children, particularly when it relates so intimately to their own work in court, risks undermining public trust in our legal system?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right to highlight an absolutely appalling case, and the thoughts of everyone in this House are with the children who were victims of that abuse. The independent judiciary has ruled on this. This Government believe in transparency in our family courts, and that is why we are working to expand the use of transparency orders, but we have to respect the independence of our judiciary, which has ruled in this particular case, not least for the reason of protecting the children in that case.

T5. [904386] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Lord Hermer says that we are not even trying to reform the convention. Why not?

Shabana Mahmood: I do not know what the right hon. Member is referring to, because the Government have already announced that we are considering the way in which our human rights laws are applied in immigration cases. I am the policy owner for the European convention on human rights, and I am considering its application within our domestic laws as well. I do not know what other reassurance he needs.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the Lord Chancellor's commitment to tightening up exclusion zones. Knowsley has some of the highest rates of domestic abuse in the country, so that kind of action will be important for victims. Does she agree that an offender's freedom should never come before a victim's right to feel and be safe?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend raises such an important point. I have been struck by so many meetings with victims in which they feel that the exclusion zones,

as currently constructed, effectively make them constrained, rather than the offenders. That is why I want to move to restriction zones for offenders, and we will bring forward our proposals in the upcoming sentencing Bill.

T6. [904387] Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): Rural communities often find it even more difficult to access legal aid providers than in urban areas. What steps is the Minister taking to help to provide access to legal aid to people in rural areas?

Sarah Sackman: It is vital that those who need legal aid—some of the most vulnerable people in our society—can access it. We are funding provisions such as Advicenow, which is an online provision. We also ensure through our contracting process through the Legal Aid Agency that there is provision right across the country to ensure that no one, including those in rural areas, struggles to access legal aid.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Claire Ball was sexually abused as a child. As an adult, she faced her abuser in court. He was allowed to provide character references. Her good character was called into question, yet she was not allowed character references. Will my hon. Friend take steps to rectify this unfairness for victims such as Claire?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that vital point. This Government are looking at character references carefully, and we will bring forward information on that in due course.

T9. [904390] Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): My constituent's child was the victim of a serious sexual offence several years ago. By the time the case comes to trial next year, it will have been nearly half a decade since the assault took place. Does the Lord Chancellor think that that is an appropriate length of time for a child to have to wait to seek justice? What words of comfort can she give to my constituent?

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Lady highlights an absolutely appalling case. If she is asking whether I think that is acceptable, the answer is no. As my hon. Friend the Victims Minister said, justice delayed is justice denied. It is for that reason that we have asked Sir Brian Leveson to recommend bold and fundamental reform. The hon. Lady has just described the human consequence of the Crown court backlog that we inherited from the past Government, and we will fix the mess.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Last week I visited Meadow Road youth centre to see the fantastic work that Lloyd and other youth workers are doing to provide an outlet for young people. However, it could be closed down due to funding uncertainty. Does the Minister agree that sporting centres such as that reduce youth offending and are hubs for rehabilitation? Will my hon. Friend commit to Dudley getting its fair share of funding and to keeping the centre open?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Centres such as the one that my hon. Friend describes in her constituency do excellent work and help to reduce youth offending. If she writes to me about the case that she refers to, I will look into it.

T10. [904391] Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): My constituent Charlotte—a victim of abuse herself—has long campaigned for justice through transcripts and highlights how they can help victims to move forward with their lives. How can we ensure that victims are provided with sentencing remarks even if the accused is acquitted in a rape case?

Sarah Sackman: The Ministry of Justice currently provides free sentencing remarks for victims of murder and manslaughter. As of last month, we have made permanent our pilot to provide those sentencing remarks to victims of rape. The hon. Lady will understand that providing full transcriptions is a costly exercise, which is why we are undertaking testing of artificial intelligence to make transcripts available in future in a lower-cost and timely manner.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): At just 12 years old, my constituent was subjected to horrific abuse by a family member who was ultimately convicted of nine offences, including four counts of rape. The offender was sentenced in youth court to just a three-year referral order and a two-year restraining order. My constituent cannot appeal this sentence under the unduly lenient sentence scheme simply because of the court in which the case was heard. Will the Minister review this deeply troubling case and consider extending the unduly lenient sentence scheme to include youth court rape convictions?

Shabana Mahmood: I hope that my hon. Friend heard the earlier answer on the unduly lenient sentence scheme and the review by the Law Commission, but if he writes to me with the specifics of that case, I will make sure that we look into it.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): As of 1 May this year, there were seven biological males in HMP Downview, a women's prison in my constituency. Can the Secretary of State confirm when they will be moved out?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Lady will be aware that those seven biological males are on E wing, which is a transgender-only facility. We will review the recent Supreme Court ruling and make sure that we are compliant in everything we do going forward. We have inherited a policy that we supported in opposition. It was a strong act by the last Government, but we will build on that following the Supreme Court's recent ruling.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): A recent freedom of information request showed that between January 2022 and March 2024, 52 prison staff were recommended for dismissal due to breaches of security. However, ten times that number resigned over similar breaches. What action has the Minister taken to strengthen training, oversight and accountability across the Prison Service to address this worrying trend and prevent further security failures?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Prison officers do an amazingly positive job in our prisons. Occasionally, prison officers let themselves down, and those cases are properly looked at. We continue to keep a tight look, and we learn from any issues that occur.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Is the Justice Secretary content that her Department spends more than half a billion pounds every year locking up criminals who belong in other countries?

Shabana Mahmood: I am content that this Government have deported more foreign national offenders than the previous Government. I am content that we have accepted the findings of the Gauke review, and we will be bringing the early removal scheme threshold from 50% down to 30% to make that sure more foreign offenders are eligible for removal from our country.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): Sadly, some of my constituents have experienced a double blow, not only from having defective cavity wall insulation installed, but from being pursued for adverse legal costs by firms such as SSB Law. Ministers have previously confirmed that the Solicitors Regulation Authority has opened an investigation. Will the Minister provide an update on that investigation and meet me to discuss how those affected can get redress?

Sarah Sackman: Once again, I am sorry to hear about the impact that the collapse of SSB Law has had on my hon. Friend's constituents and the many others affected. As she says, the Solicitors Regulation Authority is completing an investigation into the collapse. Disciplinary notices have been issued to several individuals and further decisions are expected before the summer. I am happy to provide her with a written update as that investigation is concluded.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Litigation finance plays a key role in the legal system in the UK and provides opportunities for postmasters and others to take cases to court. The Civil Justice Council has just published its report on the sector. When will the Government respond to that report?

Sarah Sackman: I thank the right hon. Member for his question, and I thank the Civil Justice Council for its work. He will understand that we have not yet had a chance to fully digest the report, but we anticipate acting on its recommendations in fairly short order.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Lord Ponsonby told the Justice Committee in February that the Government will set out a public position on reform of wedding laws, including humanist marriage, in the next few months. The Minister has said much the same today, but when will it happen, and will it include reform of current cohabitation laws, which disadvantage millions of couples?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee for that important question. He will know that our manifesto committed to reforming cohabitation law, and we will be bringing forward that reform shortly. The Law Commission's report made 57 recommendations for reform of wedding law, including enabling non-religious groups such as humanists to conduct legally binding weddings, and we will be bringing forward information on our package of reforms shortly.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Recently, I attended a service marking 40 years since William Heenan was murdered by the IRA for being a Protestant. While we honoured his memory, the self-proclaimed “First Minister for all” in Northern Ireland was visiting the newly erected statue of IRA terrorist Bobby Sands, glorifying the movement responsible for the cold-blooded murder of men such as William. Will the Minister agree to meet me and innocent victims from Northern Ireland regarding the review and improvement of the glorification of terrorism legislation that applies to Northern Ireland?

Shabana Mahmood: As I think the hon. Lady will be aware, that is primarily a policy area for our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office, but I will make sure that we raise those issues with them.¹

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Yesterday, a man was convicted of a public order offence after burning a

Koran outside the Turkish embassy. The judge said that the fact that the man was attacked was proof that he was guilty of disorderly behaviour. This is grotesque, and means that in effect, we have a blasphemy law. Does the Justice Secretary believe that this should hold, or will the Government back my Bill to put an end to all of this madness next week?

Shabana Mahmood: We do not have a blasphemy law, and we are not going to have a blasphemy law in this country. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, I believe that that specific case is going to be subject to an appeal, so it would be inappropriate for me or any other Minister to comment on the details of the matter. However, I am sure that once all other channels are exhausted and we have a final resolution, we will be debating these matters in detail in this House.

1.[*Official Report*, 1 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 1WC.](Correction)

Thames Water

12.41 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make a statement on Thames Water's financial situation.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I thank the right hon. Lady for securing this urgent question. I want to begin by making clear that Thames Water remains stable, and the Government are carefully monitoring the situation. Customers can be assured that there will be no disruption to water supply.

Thames Water is a commercial entity currently engaged in an equity raise, and KKR pulled out of that process earlier today. As Thames Water has said, the company will continue to work with its creditors as part of the equity raise to improve its financial position. There remains a market-led solution on the table, and we expect the company and its directors to continue the process that is under way and fix the financial resilience of the company in the interests of its customers. I want to be clear that the Government are prepared for all eventualities across our regulated industries and stand ready to intervene through the use of a special administration regime, should this be required to ensure the continued provision of vital public services.

The situation facing Thames is taking place within a wider context. Only last year, we saw record levels of pollution in our rivers, lakes and seas. It is clear that our water system is broken. We have already passed legislation so that the regulator can ban the undeserved multimillion-pound bonuses that so outraged the public, and we have further strengthened accountability through the introduction of up to two years in prison for polluting water bosses who break the law. We have increased the regulator's resources and launched a record 81 criminal investigations into water companies, and we have followed the "polluter pays" principle, meaning that companies that are successfully prosecuted will pay for the cost of that prosecution so that further prosecutions can follow. We have worked with the water companies to secure £104 billion of private sector investment to rebuild our broken water infrastructure. That means new sewage pipes, fewer leaking pipes, and new reservoirs across the country, as we work to end the sewage scandal that we inherited from the previous Government.

I launched the Independent Water Commission, under Sir Jon Cunliffe, so that it could outline recommendations for a once-in-a generation opportunity to transform our water industry and ensure that it delivers the service that the public deserve and our environment needs, and today Sir Jon published an interim report setting out the commission's preliminary conclusions. The Government will respond in full to the commission's final report in due course, and will outline further steps to benefit customers, attract investment and clean up our waterways.

Whether we are talking about Thames Water or about other companies serving other parts of the country, the era of profiting from pollution is over. This Government will clean up our waterways for good.

Victoria Atkins: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. May I begin by correcting the Secretary of State? When he refers to private sector investment, he is in fact referring to the bill increases that each and every one of us will pay—£31 a year—so when he talks about private sector investment, he means bill payers' investment.

Some 16 million residents and bill payers will have been concerned by this morning's news that the private equity firm KKR has pulled out of its rescue deal with Thames Water. According to a source close to KKR, one of the reasons it pulled out was its concern about negative rhetoric directed at Thames Water and the rest of the industry in recent weeks by the Secretary of State and other Ministers. In other words, the Secretary of State and his Ministers have talked themselves out of this rescue deal. I am bound to say, if only they could do the same thing with the Chagos islands deal.

On which date did the Secretary of State discover that KKR was thinking of pulling out of this deal, and what involvement did he have in the phone calls over the weekend between KKR and No. 10 spads to try to rescue it? I ask because in recent weeks there have been briefings to the press that he is considering temporary renationalisation. The Treasury has apparently instructed him that he will need to find up to £4 billion from the budget of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to cover the cost of this manoeuvre. Let me put that in context: the entire farming budget for this year is roughly £2.5 billion.

Can the Secretary of State therefore explain the options to which he has just referred, and do they include a plan for temporary renationalisation? From which budget would a temporary renationalisation come: DEFRA or central funds? That question is particularly relevant in view of the upcoming spending review, on which there has been detailed briefing, including the suggestion that the DEFRA budget is to be slashed.

The Secretary of State referred to the Cunliffe report, which we will of course look at very carefully, but can he confirm—this recalls yesterday's shambolic defence review announcement—that there is no funding for this latest review, and that it will do nothing to resolve the immediate issue of Thames Water's solvency, which he has mishandled, just as he has mishandled the family farm tax, the fishing industry and the sustainable farming incentive?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for making it clear to the House that she does not understand the principles of private sector investment, and neither is it particularly clever to stand at the Opposition Dispatch Box and make up figures to attack.

This Government stand ready for all eventualities, but I will make no apology for tackling the poor behaviour of water companies and water company executives that took place under the previous Government and that we are correcting. We even heard stories, which have been confirmed to me by water companies, of previous Conservative Secretaries of State shouting and screaming at water company bosses but not actually changing the law to do anything about the bonuses that they were able to pay themselves. This Government are taking action, working with customers, water companies and investors to ensure that we have a successful water

sector that works for the environment, customers and investors in a way that it completely failed to do under the previous Conservative Government.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Let me begin by drawing Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Let us be clear that the collapse of KKR's rescue deal is not a blip; it is a reckoning—a moment that exposes the complete bankruptcy of the privatised water model. This morning's interim Cunliffe review of the water sector confirms the scale of the crisis. It describes our water system—a regulated statutory monopoly—as being too risky for investors now. It did not seem to be too risky when shareholders were siphoning off billions in dividends while letting the pipes rot, the rivers choke and the debt pile up. The only people truly at risk now are bill payers, who face a 35% real-terms price hike in the next five years—and not just to fund clean water or climate resilience, because half of it is to boost investor return. So I ask my right hon. Friend again: when will the Government stop fiddling, put Thames Water into special administration, strip out the debt, and begin the job of returning our water system—not just Thames Water—to public ownership?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Lewis, I was very generous in bringing you in so early, but I did not expect you to make a statement yourself.

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I reassure him that the Government stand ready for any eventuality and will take action as required. We are not looking at nationalisation because it would cost over £100 billion of public money, which would have to be taken away from other public services, such as the national health service, to be given to the owners of the water companies. It would take years to unpick the current model of ownership, during which time pollution would get worse. We know that nationalisation is not the answer, because we need only look at the situation in Scotland to see that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Under the Conservatives, Thames Water was allowed to pile up nearly £20 billion of debt while pumping sewage into rivers and lakes for 300,000 hours just last year, but rewarding its shareholders with £130 million of dividends. Today, Thames Water's customers have been left in the lurch, and the Conservatives seem to think it is because we have all been a bit too mean about Thames Water.

The price must not be paid by the customers. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those who were responsible for making dreadful decisions rightly bear the cost instead? Is it not right for the company now to go into special administration, and to emerge from administration as a public interest company? Is it not also right that all water companies, including the likes of United Utilities in the north-west, move to a public interest model, so that caring for the environment matters more than profit?

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) has done more to hold Thames Water to account than Ofwat, this Government or their predecessor. Does that not prove that regulation has failed, and that

Ofwat should be abolished, with a new, powerful clean water authority given the power to clean up our lakes and rivers, and our industry?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Member for his question. There is a procedure to be followed for special administration, and we stand ready should that be required, in this case or any other case involving the regulated industries. He may have had a chance today to look at the interim report, on which Sir Jon Cunliffe is inviting comments ahead of the final report in about a month. That report will form the basis of future legislation to fix the regulatory mess we inherited from the Conservative party.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Only the Conservatives could come here and defend Thames Water. The rest of the country has seen what an appalling performance this company has given during the 35 years since privatisation. I think it is time we put this company out of its misery, but we must do so in a way that does not bring the debts it has run up on to the taxpayer or the bill payers. Can my right hon. Friend say whether one of his options is preparing for that eventuality?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are prepared for every eventuality, as I have outlined, and we will take whatever action is necessary to ensure the continuing supply of water to customers in the Thames Water region and elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Under the £3 billion loan that Thames Water has negotiated, the first drawdown of £1.5 billion will be on 30 June, which is less than four weeks away. That is contingent on Thames Water having a lock-up agreement in respect of a recapitalisation transaction, but it now has no partner to provide that. It of course chose to proceed with just one option, which has now walked away. Who does the Secretary of State think that Thames Water will now turn to—it is not exactly going to be negotiating from a position of strength—and what are the Government going to do if it cannot meet that 30 June deadline?

Steve Reed: There remains a market-led solution on the table, and we expect Thames Water to follow through with the process to ensure it is able to fix the problems it is currently facing.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents and other Thames Water users are fed up to the back teeth with having to pay more to help this company, which has failed them so badly. Obviously, the Secretary of State has to have special administration on the table, but we know that would be hugely costly to the taxpayer. I know it is hard to talk about hypotheticals, but if he does go down that route, will he have the cost to individual customers front and centre, so they do not actually have to pay more for that process?

Steve Reed: Yes, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I share her anger at the fact that bill rises were so high this year, but that is because the Conservative party did not take the necessary action to ensure that the water system was properly maintained. As anyone

[Steve Reed]

who has ever owned or lived in a house will know, if people see a crack in a wall and leave it for 10 years without fixing it, the problem gets much worse and the cost of repairing it is much more. In a very real sense, the public have been left to pay the price of Tory failure.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will ensure that Thames Water stands by its commitment to upgrade our sewage network in South Buckinghamshire? Specifically, will he ensure that the upgrade promised for the Little Marlow sewage treatment works in my constituency is delivered on time?

Steve Reed: I am happy to give the hon. Member that reassurance. The Government expect Thames Water to carry through on the full range of programmes agreed as part of the last price review process.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My constituents have been comprehensively failed by Thames Water for many years. We saw the catastrophic flood in Herne Hill in 2013, when many local businesses had to close permanently. Vulnerable customers were let down during the “beast from the east” freeze-thaw event, being left without water for days and days at a time. There are endless roadworks in the same locations where it has repeatedly failed to invest adequately in its infrastructure. Now my constituents are seeing bills go up by way more than the Ofwat determination. It is clear that this organisation is not fit for purpose. What options is my right hon. Friend considering to bring this misery to an end, and to put customers back at the heart of Thames Water’s operations?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I am sure that she will have seen today the interim report from Sir Jon Cunliffe’s water commission, which outlines his initial thoughts on how to fix the broken regulatory system. The Government have also increased compensation from what we inherited from the previous Government, so her constituents who suffer from the kinds of problems she outlined can expect far better compensation as a result of this Government’s actions.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I declare an interest as a Thames Water customer. The reality is that Thames Water is bankrupt. It cannot pay its debts and it cannot meet its legal obligations to Ofwat, the state and its customers. Therefore, surely the right thing to do is to put it out of its misery, and put it into special administration for £1. The shareholders and the debt holders know—caveat emptor—that they have all blown their dough. If the Government buy it for £1, which would be a good deal for the taxpayer, it will not have to pay huge, egregious rates of interest and taxpayers and customers will be the beneficiaries.

Steve Reed: I respectfully point out to the hon. Gentleman that Reform cares so much about the problems facing our water system that it did not mention it even once in its general election manifesto. What he is proposing—nationalising the water sector—would cost in excess of £100 billion, which is money that Reform would have to take away from the services, such as the national health

service, on which his constituents rely. I think they would be very ill-served by him if he were to take away that funding, and push up the waiting lists we have just started to see coming down as a result of this Government’s investment.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): As a neighbouring MP, the Secretary of State will know the level of outrage in my constituency at the continuous failures of Thames Water, including the five-day period earlier this year during which residents were left without water. Given that this Labour Government have introduced measures to make polluting water company executives criminally liable and to ban unjustified bonuses, does he agree that we are finally seeing accountability brought back to the water sector?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend, and indeed neighbour, for his question, and I know what a strong water champion he is on behalf of his constituents. His constituents, much like everybody else’s, will now benefit from increased compensation when there are failures. I agree with him that one of the problems we inherited from the previous Government was having a failing system with no accountability at all, so it is quite right that we have introduced new criminal liabilities and potentially prison time for polluting water bosses, and that we have given the regulator the power to ban the unfair and undeserved multimillion-pound bonuses they got away with under the Conservatives.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree with Thames Water’s own expert adviser Teneo—on page 193 of the expert advice report—that the ultimate cost to the Government if the company goes into special administration will be zero?

Steve Reed: The point is that there is a market-led solution on the table and I expect Thames Water to follow through on that.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): It is possible for an American private equity company to walk away from Thames Water, but my constituents cannot. When water company bosses fail, it is our residents who pay: in sewage discharged into rivers and in their crumbling pipes and drainage. I am therefore glad that the Government have taken bonuses off of failing bosses, but what more can the Government do to tilt incentives towards investment in our infrastructure so that my constituents get some relief?

Steve Reed: The problems that my hon. Friend points to are to do with a lack of investment throughout the entire period of the previous Government, so I was delighted that just before Christmas we secured a commitment to £104 billion of private sector investment. That is the single biggest investment in our water sector in its entire history and will be the second biggest private sector investment into any part of the economy under this Government. We are serious about clearing up the Conservatives’ sewage mess.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Thames Waters is a massive stakeholder in my constituency, and the biggest landowner. We have half of London’s drinking water in four raised reservoirs and we have a fair chunk of the Thames, from Staines to Sunbury. For 11 months now, I have been trying to get a meeting with Thames Water.

I appreciate that it has had one or two other things on its mind recently, but can the Secretary of State use his good offices to encourage Thames Water to meet me?

Steve Reed: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; the water companies—Thames Water and all the others—should of course engage with MPs who are seeking to represent the interests of their constituents. I would be very happy to approach Thames Water on his behalf to ensure that he gets the meeting he seeks.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): My constituents, like those of my colleagues, are gravely concerned about the increase in their water bills, but I am also as concerned as them about the impact on business. Crayford town centre was closed again last month—the third year on the trot—because of rotting infrastructure. What assurances can the Secretary of State give to my constituents that no matter what happens, we will continue to invest in infrastructure to ensure that those kinds of closures finally end?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend will be aware of the action we have taken through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 to give the regulator the power it needs to ban the unjustified bonuses that water bosses were able to pay themselves under the previous Government. The era where they could profit from pollution ended when that Government ended.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Green party has campaigned for the public ownership of water since the year dot, unlike certain cynical opportunists behind me on the Reform Benches. We know allowing privatised monopolies to control water leaves infrastructure crumbling, waterways running with sewage, sky-high bills, and shareholders laughing all the way to the bank. Given this obscene and fundamental failure, why will the Government not even consider bringing water back into public hands, where it belongs?

Steve Reed: The problems facing the water sector are to do with failures of governance and regulation. We need to tackle the actual problems, not the imagined ones. If we were to seek to nationalise the water sector, that would cost in excess of £100 billion that would have to be taken away from services such as the national health service or education. It would take years to unpick the current model of ownership, during which time there would be no investment and water pollution would get worse. From the example of Scotland, we know that nationalisation is not the answer, because there are also problems with pollution there. We will ensure that our priority is pure water, not the purity of the hon. Lady's ideology.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): As Thames Water dumped sewage into the Cut and the Blackwater in my constituency, the Conservative Government washed their hands not in it, but of it. This Government are acting to ban bonuses, to issue the biggest fine we have seen from Ofwat and to bring in criminal liability. As we seek more action to get to grips with the Thames Water crisis, will the Secretary of State commit to putting two things at the forefront of his mind: first, our

environment and cleaning the sewage; and, secondly, making sure that customers and our constituents get a fair deal?

Steve Reed: I am sure my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we have launched 81 criminal investigations into water companies for pollution and other failings—a dramatic increase on what we inherited from the previous Government. I am sure he will recall that they cut the resources to the regulator in half. Despite the appalling financial inheritance, we increased resources by 9% at the Budget and we have now introduced the polluter pays principle, so that where there is a successful prosecution of a water company, that company will pay the price of the investigation, so that further investigations and prosecutions can follow.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Thames Water is teetering on the brink, investors are running for the hills and my constituents are paying the price for its mismanagement through soaring bills. All the while, it is spending hundreds of millions of pounds on a proposed sewage recycling project at Teddington lock on the River Thames in my constituency, which will at best be used every two years and which some cynics suggest is designed entirely to boost its balance sheet. This morning, the Secretary of State committed to my constituent Ian McNuff that he would come and visit the site to look at the impact of the proposed project. Will he reiterate that commitment today? My hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and I would be delighted to welcome him.

Steve Reed: As I said to the hon. Lady's constituent, I would be happy to visit if my diary allows. In any case, I would be very happy to ensure she gets a meeting with the Minister for Water to discuss her concerns around Teddington.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State agree that it comes to something when the Opposition seem to be suggesting that Thames Water should maybe not be sanctioned, because that may put its preferred bidder at risk, when it had rejected others? Jon Cunliffe suggested stronger regulation, not weaker. Is it not clear that the direction that this Government are going in must be the right one?

Steve Reed: I agree. The whole mess we inherited was due to the previous Government letting the water companies get away with it; people were paying themselves multimillion-pound bonuses as they profited from pollution. That ended when the Conservative Government were defeated. We are putting the water companies under tough special measures and we will focus them on serving their customers and the environment, not themselves.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State think that the situation might improve if Thames Water executives were obliged to sign up to performance-related pay?

Steve Reed: That is a very interesting proposal. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will suggest it to Sir Jon Cunliffe, who is currently looking at a better way to regulate.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): I note the Secretary of State's reluctance to entertain public ownership, but I draw his attention to research from the University of Greenwich that shows that bringing water into public ownership would pay for itself within about seven years and that, after that, it would save the public purse up to £2.5 billion a year. Is the Secretary of State aware that immediately bringing Thames Water into special administration and permanent public ownership would cut the company's massive debt mountain in half, stop the payment of huge dividends and debt payments into the future, and within just several years actually start turning a profit for the people of this country?

Steve Reed: I beg to slightly correct my hon. Friend. Special administration is not nationalisation and nationalisation would cost in excess of £100 billion—money we would have to take away from other public services to hand to the bosses of the water companies who caused this mess in the first place. I do not think taxpayers would welcome that.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I received a note in my inbox today from the Government engagement lead for north Thames valley that says that Thames Water will run out of money in summer 2026. Will the Government commit to taking Thames Water into special administration and unburden the company of its debt via its creditors, or will Members be required to block their diaries for summer 2026 for another recess recall?

Steve Reed: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, there are procedures to follow that would require any regulated company to go into special administration. As things stand, Thames Water remains stable and there is a market-led solution on the table. We expect Thames Water to follow through on that.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): This is another example of the previous Government's failure to get a grip of our water system. Meanwhile, just last week this Government fined Yorkshire Water £350,000. My constituents are really upset to see their water bills going up. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he will never let our national infrastructure get as bad as those on the Conservative Benches did?

Steve Reed: Absolutely; we intend to clear up the mess the previous Government made. The fine that my hon. Friend refers to—indeed, there have been others—is the result of the additional criminal investigations we have launched, which follow on from the additional resources we have given the regulator so that it can investigate what is going wrong and then take action. What a difference between this Labour Government, who are putting our water companies under special measures, and the previous Government, who let them get away with it and line their pockets.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I find it deeply depressing to hear the Secretary of State say that somehow or other there is a market solution there for Thames Water. We have had 35 years of excessive profits, pollution and rising bills. He knows he will have to take Thames Water into public ownership at some point. He quotes this strange figure of £100 billion in compensation, but surely if we took it into public ownership, Parliament would set the price at which we would purchase the

company, taking into account excessive profits, pollution, damage and the destruction of so many people's lives through the way Thames Water has behaved. Will the Secretary of State be tough with it for once and say that water is a human right, and that it should be publicly owned and publicly run?

Steve Reed: Water is indeed a human right, which is why this Government are taking every step necessary to sort out the broken water system that we inherited from the previous Government.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The situation at Thames Water is deeply disturbing, and in my constituency of Camborne, Redruth and Hayle—the home of Surfers Against Sewage—there is now deep anxiety that this commercial insecurity will spread. With only three prosecutions and no meaningful penalties under the previous Government, is it not clear that the Conservatives prioritised the polluters instead of protecting the environment and customers?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend gives me the opportunity to congratulate Surfers Against Sewage on its fantastic work highlighting the failures of the water sector under the previous Government. I am sure both my hon. Friend and the charity will welcome the 81 criminal investigations we have launched in order to find out where lawbreaking is happening, to take action against it and to hold those who are responsible accountable for once.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): In this Chamber in September, I called for Thames Water to be put into special administration in order to protect my constituents. A portion of the bills they have paid since then has gone on lawyers and consultants to put together a deal that has collapsed. The Liberal Democrats—unlike the Conservatives, who continue to bury their heads in the sand—have fought against throwing more good money after bad, and more and more debt. The Government did not act in September. Will they act now, put us all out of our misery and put Thames Water into special administration?

Steve Reed: As I have said, the Government stand ready for all eventualities, should they be needed.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I refer the House to my registered voluntary interest. Over a year ago, I spoke to one of the then biggest investors in Thames Water, and I was struck by the fact that they said they had never been in a room with the regulator, other investors or the Government. I know it is difficult commercially, but I urge the Secretary of State, in trying to resolve this issue rapidly, to use his good offices and do as much as possible in the background to bring all the stakeholders to the best result.

Steve Reed: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question; I think what he is referring to, in the round, is the failures of the regulatory system and, indeed, the regulators. He will have seen that Sir Jon Cunliffe points to exactly the same problems in his interim report, published today. As we work towards the final report, published in about a month, Sir Jon is starting to point to solutions, and I am sure he will want to pay attention to the right hon. Gentleman's comments.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The British public are not fools—they know when the emperor has no clothes and, indeed, when a regulator has no teeth. Ofwat has failed, just as Thames Water has failed. Will the Government now act on the Independent Water Commission's findings, published today, scrap Ofwat and replace it with a regulator that can end this crisis, which has been decades in the making?

Steve Reed: We are working towards resetting the entire regulatory framework, as the hon. Gentleman may have seen from Sir Jon Cunliffe's report, published today. He is absolutely right, though: under the previous Government, the regulator was absolutely toothless. That is why one of the first pieces of legislation this Government passed was the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which gave the regulator the power it lacked previously to ban the unfair and unjustified multimillion-pound bonuses that so outraged the public as those companies profited from pollution.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his comments on continuity of service, which will provide some reassurance to my constituents. Thames Water has failed my constituents time and again; clearly, it needs investment. What is he doing to ensure that there is the confidence to invest in our water sector?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Part of making the sector more investable is ensuring that we have a robust, clear and predictable regulatory framework, which is what Sir Jon Cunliffe is working towards. The hon. Gentleman may have had a chance to look at the interim report that Sir Jon published today; if he has not, I recommend it to him. That is the way we create an investable water sector and bring in the money that will allow us to fix our broken water system once and for all.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. My constituent Bruno lives in Charlton-on-Otmoor. When it rains heavily, sewage flows into his garden, which is within sight of a pumping station that fails every single time. One third of bills paid to Thames Water by Bruno and other customers is used to service the company's debt; that money should instead be invested, and should go towards improving pumping stations like the one near Bruno's garden. Why will the Secretary of State not recognise that Thames is financially unviable, bring it into special administration, write down the debt and ensure that the future company serves the public interest?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman points with a graphic example to what happens when we face the scale of regulatory failure that developed untroubled under the previous Government. That is why Sir Jon Cunliffe has brought forward his report today, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will read; I hope he will also provide Sir Jon with feedback, which he is asking for ahead of his final report in a month's time. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Government have helped to secure £104 billion of private sector investment by the conclusion of the price review period. That will be used to upgrade exactly

the kind of facilities that he points to, which are letting down his constituents and mine, and those of everyone else in the House.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): With a third of customers' bills going to service Thames Water's debt, my constituents are fed up of paying higher bills for Thames Water's mistakes. Will the Government agree to put Thames Water into special measures to save my constituents and bill payers money? It is only a matter of time for Thames Water; will the Secretary of State act now and save people money?

Steve Reed: I share the hon. Gentlemen's anger that the public have been left to pay the price of Tory failure over 14 years. One of the first things I did when I was appointed Secretary of State was get the water company chief execs into my office, seven days after the election. I got them to commit to ringfencing customers' money that is earmarked for investment, so that it can never again be diverted to pay bonuses and dividends in the way that it was under the previous Conservative Government.

Mr Speaker: I call the Member for Strangford—on water, no less.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers, and for his perseverance on this subject. He will understand that it is disappointing in the extreme to hear that public funding may have to be used to bail out this company. Given that it has some 8,000 British employees and serves 25% of the UK population, Government attention is very urgently needed. What steps will be taken to ensure that this is not money down the drain, to use a pun, and that we instead reconstruct a viable concern that takes a modern approach? Does the Department have a team ready and able to step up and achieve that goal?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are ready for every eventuality, and there are teams in place to carry this out. Let me reassure him that I have no intention of using public money to bail out this company; we are looking for a market-led solution to its challenges. I thank him for his kind personal words—we will all keep persevering until we have cleaned up our waterways for good.

Victoria Atkins: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is not to continue the argument, is it?

Victoria Atkins *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: Okay, shadow Secretary of State. Let us see if it is a point of order.

Victoria Atkins: It is just to correct the record, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State has given the impression in his answers—without, I am sure, intending to—that the investigations of which he is very proud, from July last year, were a direct result of Labour winning the election in July. That is simply incorrect. As I have drawn to his attention on Twitter, courtesy of a press release on 20 February last year, we in fact invested some £55 million in further investigations, which is the—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not responsible for the correction. You have certainly put the matter on the record. The Secretary of State may want to come back; if not, we will move on.

Points of Order

1.19 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As the House will know, Laila Soueif stopped eating 247 days ago to try to save her son, the imprisoned British-Egyptian national, Alaa Abd el-Fattah. He is an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience who has been in jail for more than a decade because of his writings on democracy. Laila is now at risk of death. Have you had any indication of whether the Foreign Secretary will come to the House to inform us about what action the Government are taking to secure Alaa's urgent release?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. I have had no message to say that a member of the Government will be coming to the House today, but what she has said is certainly on the record. I know, too, that the Prime Minister took notice of the question on this subject that was put to him, and I am sure that those on the Government Front Bench will have heard what the hon. Member has said.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, following the publication of the hard copy of the strategic defence review, I informed you that I was aware that at least two major defence companies had been given a copy of that document at 8 am yesterday morning. Looking at what happened on the market, I noticed that the share price of one of those companies spiked very sharply at exactly that time. We do not know exactly what that can be attributed to, but you will be aware that the "Ministerial Code" says very clearly, on the publication of White Papers and consultation papers, that

"where commercially sensitive material is involved, no copies should be made available to the media before publication."

Presumably, that is to avoid this sort of effect from the receipt of privileged information that is not made available to other companies. Mr Speaker, I seek your advice on how to pursue this matter further. Have you heard from the Government on whether they will make a statement, or take any steps to investigate these matters?

Mr Speaker: I have had no indication that Ministers intend to come to the House to make a statement. What the shadow Secretary of State has said is on the record, and I know that he will not give up on this. I suspect that he will be on his way to the Table Office to see what advice he can be given on pursuing this matter.

Royal Fleet Auxiliary (Report on Commissioner)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.21 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for a report on the potential merits of appointing a commissioner to consider, investigate and make recommendations to address welfare issues faced by personnel serving in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and their families.

This year marks the 120th anniversary of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, which was founded in 1905. In those 120 years, RFA personnel have developed a proud sense of independence. They are non-military merchant navy sailors who support and supply the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines, and they have a steadfast dedication to public service. Much of their work happens behind the scenes—they do not often make the headlines—but they are vital to UK defence, maritime power, and humanitarian and disaster relief.

The RFA refuels warships at sea. It delivers ammunition, supplies, food and water, and it transports Royal Marines and equipment to where they are needed. RFA ships were in the Falklands, Kosovo, the first Gulf war, Iraq and Afghanistan. RFA personnel are not armed combatants, but they are deployed in war zones and they face danger. Recent RFA deployments have included: anti-narcotics missions in the Caribbean, the Persian gulf and the Indian ocean; the provision of disaster relief to Haiti, following earthquakes in 2010 and 2021; anti-people smuggling operations in the mediterranean; and the provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

The RFA Proteus was instrumental in responding to the security threat posed by the Russian vessel Yantar in the North sea last November. Responding to this sort of “grey zone” security threat, especially to subsea energy and communications infrastructure, is an increasing part of Royal Navy and RFA work to enhance national maritime security.

As RFA ships are maintained at the port of Falmouth, in my constituency, and call it their home, I have become accustomed to seeing them sailing in and out of Falmouth bay. I remember watching the RFA Argus depart in September 2014 to deploy off the west coast of Africa during the Ebola pandemic. She provided crucial medical equipment, supplies and food, and transported doctors, nurses and military personnel. On her return, she was honoured with an Admiralty Board letter of commendation.

I have highlighted these examples to show how important and varied RFA operations are. RFA personnel are, without doubt, incredibly hard-working, committed and courageous, but due to the unique nature of their service, they often do not receive the same level of protection and recognition as the rest of the forces. In recent years, the RFA has faced challenges. Resources are stretched, and the RFA has taken on more and more jobs previously done by the Royal Navy. At the same time, there is an ageing fleet and crew shortages—only six of 11 RFA ships are currently operational, and skilled positions are understaffed by 30% to 50%. The UK carrier strike group in the Pacific ocean is relying

on the Norwegian navy for solid support capacity due to the RFA Fort Victoria being non-operational. The Fort Victoria is more than 35 years old, and a replacement for the UK’s only solid support ship is not expected until the early 2030s. It is crucial for the UK’s security and impact on the world stage that the RFA is properly resourced. I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to the RFA during his statement on the strategic defence review yesterday.

The recruitment and retention crisis in the RFA has been fuelled by issues with pay and terms and conditions. A 2024 report commissioned from Faststream by the Ministry of Defence found that the RFA leave ratio was one to 0.69, and that the RFA offered less time off per day worked than any other sector. Personnel regularly have four-month sea tours. Officers have experienced a real-terms pay cut of over 30% since 2010. The Faststream report stated:

“The RFA’s current offering pays lower than the market average for the net day rate in every rank benchmarked.”

I was therefore pleased to see the pay deal that was agreed earlier this year by this Government. Alongside a pay increase, there was a commitment to improved terms and conditions, including reduced length of assignments, and an agreement to ratify a new collective bargaining agreement reached by the RFA and maritime trade unions. This, I hope, is just the beginning; we need to do more and go further to support RFA personnel. The Armed Forces Commissioner will be an independent, direct point of contact for armed forces personnel—someone with whom they can raise complaints and welfare issues. There should be an equivalent for the RFA—or the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill could include the RFA. It would mean that RFA personnel could raise concerns about bullying, unsafe working conditions, discrimination, and misconduct, but inclusion under the Armed Forces Commissioner’s remit—or indeed that of a separate commissioner—would not change the RFA’s legal status. It would not militarise the RFA, which would retain the separate identity of which its personnel are so proud. Unions should rightly have a say in proposals for a commissioner that encompasses the RFA.

The Armed Forces Commissioner will supersede the previous service complaints ombudsman commissioner, whose remit was much narrower. This follows through on the promise made by this Labour Government to renew the contract between the nation and those who serve. That contract should not end at the gates of a naval base, or the stern of an auxiliary ship. It should recognise the service of RFA personnel.

The families of servicemen and women will now also be able to raise issues with the commissioner. If RFA personnel came under the commissioner’s remit, their families would benefit, too. Partners and children of service personnel and the RFA are alone for long stretches of time. We know that service takes a toll not just on those in uniform, but on those around them; they need that support and that scaffolding, too. I am very aware of that as a former Navy wife.

We cannot claim to support the forces if we do not support those in auxiliary roles—the people who facilitate global deployments. The RFA must not be an afterthought in defence policy. Now more than ever, we need to provide RFA personnel with decent pay, conditions, career progression, equal time off, and modern vessels

[Jayne Kirkham]

to reflect the importance of the role that they play in an ever-changing and dangerous world.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Jayne Kirkham, Anna Gelderd, Andrew George, Anneliese Midgley, Ben Maguire, Chris Bloore, Graeme Downie, Jacob Collier, Laurence Turner, Luke Akehurst, Noah Law and Perran Moon present the Bill.

Jayne Kirkham accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 June, and to be printed (Bill 252).

ARMED FORCES COMMISSIONER BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 18 November 2024 (Armed Forces Commissioner Bill: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Question agreed to.

Armed Forces Commissioner Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 1

ARMED FORCES COMMISSIONER

1.31 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard):

I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Lords amendments 2 and 3, Government motions to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendments 4 to 7.

Luke Pollard: I am delighted that the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill has returned to the House. I rise to speak to Lords amendments 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7, which were proposed by the Government in the other place, as well as Lords amendments 2 and 3, which were proposed by the Opposition and to which we have proposed an amendment in lieu to strengthen them.

Before I start, I would like to recognise the publication of the strategic defence review yesterday, which signifies a landmark shift in our deterrence and defence. We made clear then, as I do today, that our people are at the heart of defence. The strategic defence review sets out our mission to look after our people better, to unlock their full potential, and to build a “one defence” culture that is focused, inclusive, respectful, and centred on valuing all contributions. The establishment of an Armed Forces Commissioner is a key part of that mission.

I thank all Members of both Houses for their scrutiny of this important piece of legislation. It is a landmark step in this Government’s commitment to renew the nation’s contract with those who serve and to strengthen support for our armed forces and the families who stand behind those who serve our nation. I extend my thanks in particular to Lord Coaker, the Minister in the House of Lords, for his invaluable support and collaborative approach in guiding the Bill through the other place. I also thank Baroness Goldie, the Earl of Minto, Baroness Smith of Newnham, Lord Stirrup, Lord Stansgate, Lord Browne of Ladyton, Lord Beamish and Baroness Newlove, to name just a few who made valuable contributions in the other place on this important piece of legislation.

Seven amendments were made to the Bill in the other place. Before I turn to them, I remind colleagues that this Bill is part of a manifesto commitment made by Labour during the general election to improve the service life of all those who serve and, importantly, to provide for the very first time an opportunity for family members to raise concerns about service welfare as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I think all of us in the House very much welcome the Armed Forces Commissioner. We have a new commissioner in Northern Ireland who is doing an excellent job. There is also a role for local councils to deliver the armed forces covenant. For councils in Northern Ireland that are perhaps hesitant—I am being very gentle with my words here—to fully integrate the covenant, will they be encouraged to

embrace in totality the opportunities that the Bill provides? Everything in the Bill is good, and I think the Government need to be congratulated on all they are doing.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Implementing the armed forces covenant is something that this Government feel strongly about. That is why we are bringing forward legislation that will implement the armed forces covenant fully into law on a national basis, so that it grips not just on local authorities but on central Government. There is real merit in implementing the armed forces covenant at a local level. There are pockets of best practice nationwide—not just in military cities like Plymouth, which I represent, but across the country. It can also be of benefit to councils and communities, so I would encourage him to continue his campaign to ensure that the covenant is properly implemented.

For too long we have heard stories of bad experiences that have gone unchallenged, some resulting in tragedy. The Defence Secretary has made it clear from his first day in the Department that there will be zero tolerance for this type of behaviour. That is why we are acting, and that is why I hope that the whole House will support this vital endeavour and the amendments to the Bill.

I invite the House to agree to Lords amendments 1, 4, 5 and 6, which were made by the Government in response to suggestions made by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. They have the effect of fully implementing the Committee's recommendations to change the regulation-making power to define relevant family members contained in the Bill from the negative to the affirmative procedure.

Michelle Scroggum (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I recently met the mother of Jaysley Beck, who tragically took her own life after being sexually assaulted and abused within the services. I was really impressed by her mother's strength and her campaign. Does the Minister agree that the Bill will give more powers to family members, and that maybe we can avoid these tragic incidents in future?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for raising a serious case and a real tragedy, not just for the family of Gunner Beck but our entire armed forces. It needs to be a wake-up call, where we recognise that the behaviour within some of our services is unacceptable and that we need to make improvements. For that very reason we must continue to support the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, because it will enable family members as well as those serving in uniform to raise genuine service welfare complaints with the commissioner.

It will not solve every problem we have with the culture in our armed forces, but it provides a route for individuals to raise concerns outside the chain of command with an independent champion. My hon. Friend mentions a conversation she had with Gunner Beck's family, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that to make sure that we properly learn the lessons that defence needs to learn.

I am proud to come from a naval family and to say clearly from this Dispatch Box that the families of our armed forces matter. For the very first time, this Bill will give them a say and allow them to raise concerns.

Family members are a crucial element of the commissioner's remit, and we agree that the definition of a relevant family member should be subject to parliamentary debate and approval. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), raised that point on Second Reading, and we support it. We are moving it from the negative procedure to the affirmative procedure, which will enable that discussion to take place.

Lords amendment 7 is a technical amendment that is consequential on clause 3, and I invite the House to support it. Clause 3 amends section 340B of the Armed Forces Act 2006 to specify that a "person" rather than only an "officer" may decide whether a service complaint is admissible. This is an evolution of the way that the service complaints system has worked and is a prudent change to make.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): The Minister mentions family members and other individuals raising complaints, but some of the complaints will be about devolved issues such as health, education and other issues that affect families. Can he reassure me that the Armed Force Commissioner will have an effective method of working with the devolved Administrations to make sure that the concerns of armed forces across the UK can be addressed?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is right that defence is a reserved matter, and so it is appropriate for this place to introduce a UK-wide Armed Forces Commissioner. It is also right that whoever is appointed to the role of Armed Forces Commissioner is able to raise issues of concern with the Administrations in every part of the United Kingdom—whether it is London, Edinburgh, Cardiff or Belfast. Equally, they should be able to engage with local councils. The Armed Forces Commissioner role builds on the work of the Service Complaints Ombudsman, who already has a good working relationship with the devolved Administrations, so I am certain that whoever is appointed to role will be able to build on that and make sure that, for instance, if a housing issue is highlighted by someone based in Scotland, that can be raised with the appropriate individuals in the Scottish Government.

Lords amendment 7 will ensure that the language in section 340N of the 2006 Act is also updated from "officer" to "person" so that there is no inconsistency in the legislation.

I will now turn to Lords amendments 2 and 3 and the debate that took place in the other place about whistleblowing. I thank Baroness Goldie, one of the previous Defence Ministers in the House of Lords, in whose name the amendments were tabled, for her characteristically considered and constructive contributions to the Bill's passage and for raising a serious issue. The amendments seek to introduce a new general function for the commissioner

"to investigate concerns raised by a whistleblower in relation to the welfare of persons subject to service law and their relevant family members,"

and to define the term "whistleblower" for the purposes of this Bill.

We believe that the amendments, while well intentioned, are unnecessary because the Bill is already designed to provide a voice for armed forces personnel and their

[*Luke Pollard*]

families outside the chain of command. The commissioner can already investigate any general service welfare matter that they choose; anyone can raise an issue with the commissioner, including the type of person defined in Baroness Goldie's amendment; and the commissioner is independent, sits outside the chain of command and the Ministry of Defence, and reports directly to Parliament and not to senior officers nor to Ministers.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I acknowledge the many merits of the Bill. However, it seems that Baroness Goldie was seeking to ensure that women such as those abused at the army college in Harrogate, near my constituency, and other victims have a clear and well-known route called whistleblowing. I urge the Government to not underestimate that whistleblowing presents a real opportunity to encourage people to come forward.

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right that the entire Bill, to an extent, is about whistleblowing, because it allows anyone in our armed forces and their relevant family members to raise a concern outside the chain of command. Effectively, that is the very heart and soul of what we propose in this legislation.

I will come to the amendment in lieu in a moment, but certainly, with that, we seek to strengthen the provisions that Baroness Goldie's amendments propose. We agree that there is an issue that needs to be addressed within our armed forces and we recognise that there are behaviours that are unacceptable. The Ministry of Defence's Raising our Standards work, which the Minister for Veterans and People leads on, is an important part of providing an opportunity for everyone who serves to raise those concerns and have confidence that they can do so within the chain of command, but where they feel unable to do so, there will be a route available to them through the Armed Forces Commissioner to raise those concerns. Equally, as I just mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (*Michelle Scrogg*), this is about the ability of family members, who may feel less constrained by the chain of command or the structure of the armed forces, to do so on behalf of their family unit. I entirely understand the purpose of the amendments and I agree with their spirit, but we seek to strengthen them in the amendment in lieu.

One of the key parts of the amendments was to ensure that anyone who raises a concern will have their identity protected. It worth noting that the Armed Forces Commissioner will be bound by the data protection legislation that this House has passed, meaning that the personal information and details provided by anyone who contacts the commissioner will be subject to stringent controls.

On the specifics of the word "whistleblower", we all understand what we mean when we hear that term, and it is important that we provide opportunities for those within our services to raise concerns. However, it is not completely straightforward from a legal point of view how that is enacted in this piece of legislation. Although there is some limited precedent for the use of the term, there is no single meaning and it requires additional context to explain what it means in each case. That

means some technical changes are required to Baroness Goldie's amendment to make it operable within the Bill, which is why we seek to strengthen it.

The amendments seek to define the term in reference to certain people and topics, but importantly, no additional protections are created because the commissioner can already investigate anything that is contained in the amendment proposed by Baroness Goldie. However, it is a useful opportunity for us to restate the importance of being able to raise concerns, especially about the abuse that happens in our armed forces, and to state on the record from the Dispatch Box that there is no place for any of that abuse in our armed forces and that not only is the Ministry of Defence taking steps to tackle it but there are protections in the Bill to enable that.

None the less, I understand the intention behind the amendments, which is to ensure that people feel better able to approach the commissioner without fear of repercussions or their identity being made public. I wholeheartedly agree with the spirit behind that. A united voice from this House, saying that we will not tolerate unacceptable behaviours, will send a strong message to those watching this debate—both perpetrators and complainants—that the zero tolerance approach we want for the armed forces is one that we will all get behind.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right. We have to have that zero tolerance approach, not only because it is right for our service personnel who sacrifice so much and for their families, but because it strengthens our whole armed forces. That is why it was so important to see that focus on personnel in the strategic defence review. Will the Minister reflect briefly on the connection between the Armed Forces Commissioner and the strategic defence review in turning around the issue we have had with retention in our armed forces and finally getting to grips with that crisis?

1.45 pm

Luke Pollard: Certainly, the consequence of one of our proposed objectives with the Bill—making it easier for people to raise an issue about service life and to have that addressed—is improved retention. We know that people have concerns about service life. Housing is a good example, and yesterday's strategic defence review allocated £1.5 billion to improve it. However, we need to make sure that we are reflecting on our approach, and for me there is a good reason we do so, which is based on warfighting. In the event that our people are asked to commit to combat, every member of our forces should know that regardless of the skin colour or religion of the people standing beside them in the trench, or of who they love, they will have their back, and they will have their back consistently. That equality of service is vital to military discipline and to upholding our values, and it is also something that we still need to work on. For that reason, we need to make sure that the Bill passes and can be implemented swiftly.

We want people to trust the commissioner and feel confident that their issues will be addressed and that they will not face any negative consequences as a result of coming forward. As such, I have tabled an amendment in lieu that would go further than Baroness Goldie's amendments and ensure genuine protection in respect of reports prepared by the commissioner, preserving the anonymity of individuals who make complaints.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I note with interest the Government's amendment in lieu. Does the Minister agree that, in all of this, which is unobjectionable in the main, there is a concern not around the person making the complaint but around the person about whom the complaint is made? As we live in an increasingly litigious society—the number of service complaints are going up and the number of cases considered by the ombudsman has been going up—it is likely that the Armed Forces Commissioner's work and the number of people complained about will go up. Is the Minister satisfied that there is sufficient support for those about whom complaints are made, since the distress that it causes when those complaints are unfounded, or unfounded in part, is significant?

Luke Pollard: I know that the right hon. Gentleman has experience as a Minister who covered this area in the last Government. He is right that we need to reflect on the fact that everyone is innocent until proven guilty. Certainly, we need to make sure that we are looking after our whole force.

It is true that there are issues that we believe are not being addressed because there is not a sufficient spotlight being shone on them. It is for that reason that the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill provides for a reporting function not to Ministers or the Chief of the Defence Staff, but to Parliament. Indeed, I believe the Defence Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) is likely to receive those reports. It is precisely for those reasons that I believe the commissioner may be able to offer a view as to how the system they oversee will be able not only to protect victims and perpetrators, and seek justice with perpetrators, but deal with people who may be falsely accused. Largely, I expect general service welfare matters to be the predominant piece of activity for the commissioner, rather than necessarily looking at individual aspects of abuse or misbehaviour for which there is already a legal system within defence that can address some of those. As a whole, however, I take the right hon. Gentleman's point.

In addition to the amendment that we have tabled in lieu, the Government have also committed in the other place to updating their current Raising a Concern policy, which includes replicating the protections available to civilians under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. The update will outline the role of the commissioner and ensure that similar protections for people under the policy are applied to disclosures made to the commissioner. That will include provisions related to anonymity and confidentiality, and ensure that anyone who raises a genuine concern in line with the policy will be protected from unfair or negative treatment due to the raising of that concern.

Further, the Government will conduct a thorough communications campaign to ensure that members of our armed forces and their families are clear about the role of the commissioner and how to access their office, how it interacts with existing policy protections and policy, the type of issues that can be raised, and how they will be dealt with.

Taken together, our Government amendment and the additional commitments that I have outlined today and that Lord Coaker outlined to the House of Lords will establish genuine protections for people wishing to raise

concerns anonymously, and build trust and confidence with the armed forces and their family members in a way that we cannot envisage would be achieved by Lords amendments 2 and 3 on their own.

This Bill is a critical step in renewing the nation's contract with those who serve. For the first time, we are providing them and their family members with a genuinely independent champion, a direct point of contact for them to raise welfare matters and to have those issues scrutinised in due course by Parliament, and in turn for the Government—this Government and any Government in the future—to be held to account. That can only be a positive thing. I therefore urge the House to support the Government's position.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): In Southend and Rochford I have had the pleasure of meeting many veterans and service people, men and women, who keep our country safe. An Armed Forces Commissioner will be a direct point of contact for those serving and their families, and will have direct authority to investigate welfare complaints from housing to kit to issues affecting family life. As a former soldier myself, I know that losing a lot of kit happened often, but I digress. This role comes alongside record amounts of funding for the armed forces and housing, so I am sure that colleagues across the House are extremely proud—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Member really ought not to be making a mini-speech. Perhaps he is drawing his comments to a close.

Mr Alaba: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure colleagues across the House are extremely proud of our armed forces. Does the Minister agree that this Bill is an opportunity for us to show a united Chamber in support of our armed forces and that colleagues should support it?

Luke Pollard: I agree with my hon. Friend's interventions, and he need not worry, because I will not be sending him a bill for any of the kit that he might have misplaced over the years.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that this House is at its best when we focus not on the party politics that may give us cause to divide ourselves, but on support for our armed forces personnel, their families and the missions that we ask them to undertake to keep our nation safe. It is precisely for that reason that I hope colleagues across the House will take note of what he has said and present a united House in relation to these amendments.

For the first time, we are providing our armed forces and their family members with a genuinely independent champion, a direct point of contact for them to raise welfare matters and to have those issues scrutinised by Parliament and, in turn, for the Government to be held to account. I therefore urge the House to support the Government's position, to put aside party politics and to put our troops first, so that we can move closer to delivering this vital manifesto commitment for our brave servicemen and women and their families.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call shadow Minister Mark Francois.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, perhaps I could begin by referring briefly to the ten-minute rule Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), which immediately preceded this debate. As a Navy wife, she clearly fully understands the vital role of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary in supporting our armed forces, and as the son of someone who served in the Royal Navy in the second world war, I have grown up to appreciate everything that the RFA does for us. It is a wonderful organisation. I was sitting on the Front Bench throughout her speech and I wish her Bill all the best.

As the shadow Armed Forces Minister, I rise to speak as a critical friend of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, driven by a commitment to ensuring that it delivers real and meaningful support for the brave men and women who serve our country. Our armed forces personnel deserve a system that honours their sacrifice and guarantees fairness, accountability and transparency when concerns arise.

To recap, the Bill at its core seeks to strengthen oversight by establishing an independent Armed Forces Commissioner modelled partly on the German system, with Ofsted-like powers to access military sites and relevant information for investigations. If implemented well, it could improve the lived experience of our servicemen and women, bolstering public confidence in how their issues are handled.

A truly independent, well-resourced commissioner is a vision that I believe commands support right across the House. Saying that, where are Reform Members? This is legislation that is designed to enhance the welfare of our armed forces and their families, so why are they not here? Having checked in *Hansard*, I know that they were not here yesterday either. They took no part in either of the urgent questions, and no part whatsoever in the statement or the very long debate that followed it. Why? It is because Reform Members do not do defence. They are one-club golfers with one single issue, and unfortunately the welfare of our armed forces personnel and their families does not seem to be it. Their empty Benches speak volumes, and while I am at it, are there any Scottish National party Members here? Oh well, they do not take this very seriously either, do they?

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has raised this point. I have sat in this House on, I think, all the occasions when we have been discussing defence, and I was also sorry to note that there were no Reform Members here for either the VE Day debate or the Remembrance Day debate. Does he agree that that shows the complete dereliction of a party that aspires to govern?

Mr Francois: For a party that sometimes likes to wrap itself in the flag, if I can put it like that, one would think that when it came to our armed forces, Reform would be more bothered. Empirically, that is not always the case. We are not allowed to take photographs in the Chamber—that is a mortal sin, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is an interview-without-coffee offence for you or the Speaker—but if we were allowed to take such a photo, or if someone else, perhaps outside the House, wanted to take such a photo, those empty Benches would speak volumes.

At the heart of the amendments we are debating today is the issue of whistleblowing. Admittedly, this issue was not much discussed in Committee in March, as I think the Minister would testify. At that time, the two key issues that emerged were the potential adverse effects of inheritance tax changes on death-in-service payments, on which I am afraid the Government have done virtually nothing, and VAT on school fees, including for military children. All I will say on the latter is that we eagerly await the outcome of the High Court case.

That brings me to the critical issue, which was debated at some length in the other place and is now before us: the need to empower the commissioner to investigate concerns raised by whistleblowers while protecting their anonymity. In the other place, our Opposition spokesperson, Baroness Goldie, argued passionately that the commissioner must have explicit authority to investigate whistleblowing concerns within the scope of this Bill centred on welfare and general service issues, to ensure that those raising concerns—whether service personnel, their families or friends—can do so anonymously. Indeed, the Minister in his “Dear Colleague” letter dated 30 May outlined that

“Baroness Goldie’s amendments raised an important debate”.

He says today that the amendments were well intentioned, and we agree. The Government, however, contend that existing mechanisms—a confidential hotline, investigation teams and improved complaints processes—are sufficient. This is where we do not agree. They argue that our amendment is unnecessary because it does not confer additional powers on the commissioner.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Recently, General Sir Roly Walker, Chief of the General Staff, said that he was “ashamed” by the stories of sexual misconduct—predominately crimes committed against women in service. He also said that lots of these crimes go unreported, so lots are unknown as well as the terrible ones that are known. How can we have a truly effective independent commissioner if there is no whistleblowing function through which these crimes can be reported?

2 pm

Mr Francois: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful argument. I hope that if time allows, he will also make a speech.

The Government themselves acknowledge that the commissioner provides an enhanced, independent route for raising concerns. Our amendments build on that by embedding a clear, accessible and statutorily protected whistleblowing function. That simplicity is vital for ensuring that service personnel, especially those who feel most vulnerable, can come forward without fear.

The Government have further argued that whistleblowing lacks a clear legal definition. However, that claim is simply untenable. As Baroness Goldie powerfully highlighted in the other place, the Armed Forces Act 2006—section 340Q is titled “Investigation of concerns raised by whistle-blowers”—and the Police Reform Act 2002 provide clear statutory precedent for the term. Those Acts demonstrate that including whistleblowing adds tangible value to legislation, ensuring protections for those who expose wrongdoing. If whistleblowing is robust enough for the Police Reform Act and the very

Act that this Bill is designed to amend, how can the Government argue that it lacks clarity or value in this context?

Let me address the Government's contradictory stance. In Committee in the other place, we proposed a broader amendment to empower the commissioner. In the other place, the Ministry of Defence dismissed it as too wide-ranging. In the spirit of constructive compromise, which has been the general tenor of the Bill throughout, we narrowed our amendment to focus specifically on welfare and service issues. Now the Government claim that this revised amendment is too narrow and does not grant sufficient powers—too broad, then too narrow. That inconsistency displays a reluctance to engage with the substance of our proposal.

To illustrate my point, let me offer two theoretical examples to the House. First, let us consider the possibility of a whistleblower being someone who served in the British Army in Northern Ireland. This is an extremely topical issue at present, as the Minister will be aware, given the Government's appalling remedial order to excise key parts of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. I do not know whether any armed forces personnel who served, or indeed are still serving, in Northern Ireland have privately signed the parliamentary petition entitled, "Protect Northern Ireland Veterans from Prosecutions", but as of today, over 131,000 people have signed it. We therefore look forward to an early debate in Parliament on these matters. While we are of course in the hands of the Petitions Committee and not you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on this occasion, we are hopeful that the Committee might allow a debate to take place as soon as possible, and certainly prior to the summer recess. I see Labour Members nodding, so I am keen to get that into *Hansard*.

Secondly, let us consider the theoretical example of an officer serving as a military assistant to a Minister on the fifth floor of the Ministry of Defence. What protection in law would that officer have if they became seriously concerned that a Minister they were working for was about to breach the ministerial code? Not that any Minister here today would, of course. How would an officer faced with a moral dilemma of that magnitude be permitted to act as a whistleblower to raise concerns that Ministers had acted inappropriately—something that would certainly impact their general welfare as well as the reputation of the Government they served? We will see if the Minister has anything to add before we conclude.

In summary—I know others are keen to speak—the Government have offered assurances about anonymity in the commissioner's work and promised a communications campaign to raise awareness of the commissioner's role. These are welcome steps, but, as I hope I have argued, they are not enough. A communications campaign is no substitute for a clear, statutory whistleblowing provision that service personnel can rely on with confidence. The other place recognised that, delivering a significant cross-party defeat to the Government last month when Conservative peers, alongside others, successfully amended the Bill to include a robust, anonymous whistleblowing route. Lords amendments 2 and 3 are not just about process; they are about rebuilding trust.

I will listen closely to the Minister's response, but if the Government cannot move beyond their current position and continue to offer assurances without real

statutory weight—I am afraid we find the amendment in lieu unconvincing—we will have no choice but to test the opinion of the House. We owe it to our service personnel to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns are properly investigated.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As we consider the Lords amendments to the Bill, I welcome the opportunity to reflect on the progress made and the important issues that these amendments address.

I am pleased to support Lords amendments 1, 4, 5 and 6, which enhance parliamentary oversight of secondary legislation under the Bill. The Government's support for those amendments is a positive step towards greater transparency and accountability in the implementation of this important legislation.

I also want to highlight the significance of whistleblower protection. Lords amendments 2 and 3 rightly draw attention to the need to safeguard those who come forward with concerns. I welcome His Majesty's official Opposition's efforts to bring attention to this issue and to the Government's commitment to this principle, particularly through the amendments they have tabled in lieu, which aim to protect the anonymity of individuals making complaints. That is essential for fostering a culture of openness and trust within our armed forces and ensuring the Armed Forces Commissioner has the confidence of serving personnel and those who make complaints.

I am grateful to the Armed Forces Minister for his clarification on the matter just now. As Chair of the Defence Committee, I want to reiterate that our Committee very much looks forward to holding a pre-appointment hearing with the Secretary of State's preferred candidate for the first Armed Forces Commissioner—a vital step in ensuring the independence and effectiveness of this new office.

Finally, as this is likely our last opportunity to debate the Bill in the House, I look forward to its passage into law and thank all those who have been involved in drafting and amending the Bill as it has made its way through both Houses.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I rise to speak in support of Lords amendments 2 and 3, which were tabled by Conservative peer Baroness Goldie and supported in the other place by my Liberal Democrat colleagues. I urge Members on both sides of the House to reject the Government's proposals to remove them and replace them with a watered-down version. The amendments do something simple but profoundly important: they embed within the commissioner's role a clear and explicit whistleblowing function, one that empowers service personnel and their families to raise concerns about welfare and wrongdoing safely and with confidence, and, crucially, one that provides statutory protections for those who speak up.

A complaints process and a whistleblowing system have two different purposes. A complaint is often about personal redress whereas a whistleblowing disclosure is

[Helen Maguire]

about drawing attention to serious wrongdoing, often at great personal risk in the public interest. The Government's amendment in lieu acknowledges the importance of anonymity, but it does not go far enough. It merely inserts a provision to protect identifying details in publishing reports and only where the disclosure was "in response to a request". It neither defines nor protects whistleblowers in statute.

Whistleblowing is a vital tool in surfacing systemic failure—something that our service personnel clearly need. It seems like almost every month brave service personnel and veterans come forward with shocking accounts of misconduct. Their accounts underline how much courage it takes to speak up and how easily that courage can be crushed by fear of social backlash, reprisal or career damage. The Government argued that anyone can raise a concern with the commissioner and that data protection law already protects anonymity, but data protection is not the same as whistleblower protection. It is passive and does not actively encourage disclosures, does not instil confidence and does not grant status or safeguards against retaliation.

The whistleblowing amendments would not overburden the commissioner; they would simply recognise whistleblowing for what it is: a unique and necessary channel for uncovering wrongdoing that might otherwise be buried. They are tightly drawn, limited to welfare matters, and designed to ensure that information reaches someone with the authority to act. The commissioner will be tasked with improving the culture and confidence among our armed forces. Nothing would do more to support that mission than keeping the amendments, which would introduce a whistleblowing function, giving our brave service personnel and their families an independent, trusted person to whom they can speak safely and be heard without fear.

I will vote against the Government motion to remove Lords amendments 2 and 3, and I urge colleagues to do the same. The amendments give confidence to those who wish to speak up, but who are afraid of the consequences. "Whistleblowing" is a simple, clear and well-understood term that can provide extra assurance. It could make this Bill truly transformative to the armed forces culture.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Yesterday's strategic defence review rightly put our brave service personnel at the heart of defence plans, and this Bill is a fundamental part of renewing the nation's contract with our armed forces. It was an honour to serve on the Public Bill Committee, and I am pleased to see the amendments made in the other place, which improve the Bill. However, I support Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendments 2 and 3.

Lords amendments 2 and 3 would introduce a new general function for the commissioner to investigate concerns raised by whistleblowers in relation to the welfare of persons subject to service law and relevant family members, but the House will know that the commissioner can already investigate any general service matters that they choose, and the Bill already allows anyone who wishes to raise such issues to do so. While the Lords amendments have been important in raising issues around anonymity for whistleblowers, Government

amendment (a) would go further by ensuring genuine protection for people who raise an issue that later features in an investigation and report by the commissioner.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I rise to speak to Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendments 2 and 3. We have seen time and again how important it is to allow our service personnel to speak up in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our armed forces and the success of critical missions. The 1994 Mull of Kintyre Chinook crash, the 2005 loss of the C-130 Hilton 22, and the 2006 loss of Nimrod XV230 serve as stark reminders of what happens when concerns are not openly reported. I therefore welcome the Government's commitment to maintaining anonymity by ensuring that no identifying information, or information that could lead to identification, is included without the explicit consent of service members. I also welcome the Government's assurance that they will update the MOD's "raising a concern" policy to reflect civilian protections and ensure that all individuals who come forward can do so with guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): Does my hon. and gallant Friend agree that referencing such awful disasters really brings into focus the lack of public awareness of the lack of support for our armed forces in previous years, and that this landmark Labour Bill will transform the culture in our forces in a positive way and is long overdue?

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. This Bill marks a culture change in how the Government go about interacting with our armed forces, and provides them with a sense of pride but also the necessary process to ensure that their service is protected and treated with dignity and respect.

Ultimately, whether it is reporting on ongoing cultural issues of bullying and sexual harassment, poor quality housing or equipment safety concerns, every service member should feel empowered to do so and feel assured that they can and should speak up. We have seen how the armed forces ombudsman has consistently been unable to ensure that the service complaints system does not disadvantage or discriminate. Such findings raise serious concerns, highlighting the critical need for the new and empowered Armed Forces Commissioner to regain the trust of service members. Building that trust is more important than simply enacting new legislation; it is essential that service members feel confident that their complaints will be handled anonymously and fairly.

Ultimately, fostering a culture of trust in the armed forces must take precedence over the specific language of the legislation. It is the practical implementation by the chain of command, and commitment to the fair treatment of all, that will truly make a difference. I recognise that this Government are committed to renewing our country's contract with those who serve, and the introduction of an Armed Forces Commissioner is an important step. The success of the Armed Forces Commissioner largely depends on the effective implementation of this Bill, and on the willingness of the chain of command to work with the commissioner. However, the Government must ensure that the service complaints system tackles the deep-rooted systemic issues that persist in the armed forces, recognising that the

establishment of the Armed Forces Commissioner is only one part of much-needed broader reform—not that Reform—

Mr Francois: They are not here!

Mr Bailey: Indeed they are not.

We need to restore trust and deliver meaningful change for all of those who serve.

2.15 pm

Luke Pollard: With the leave of the House, I will respond to the debate in the time that we have left. On behalf of the Government, I thank all Members for their contributions. It is clear that there is widespread support for the principle of introducing an Armed Forces Commissioner, for the Armed Forces Commissioner's remit to include relevant family members, and for us to get on and implement the Bill well, which I can assure the shadow Minister is our intention.

I will refer to a number of the points that have been raised in today's debate. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) that we need to ensure that the system works. The Bill in front of us is not designed to adjust the procedures, policies or process of the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces as it transitions into the Armed Forces Commissioner's Office, but it is designed to expand the powers of SCOAF. The current Service Complaints Ombudsman has been asking for that in her annual reports, and we have provided an expanded remit in the Bill in front of us. I share my hon. Friend's determination to see an improved system, and I place on record my thanks to Mariette Hughes, the current Service Complaints Ombudsman, for her work in reducing the backlog of service complaints that were not being addressed. In Committee we heard about the progress that has been made, which was very welcome, and I am certain that that improvement will be embedded in the work of the Armed Forces Commissioner as well.

The shadow Minister raised the issue of Northern Ireland veterans, and we owe our veterans from Operation Banner a huge debt of gratitude. Their professionalism and sacrifice saved lives in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom, and helped bring about peace. There will be no rewriting of history. However, the previous Government's woeful legacy Act did nothing to help those veterans. Over and over again, it was found to be unlawful by the UK courts, and any incoming Government at the last general election would have had to repeal and replace that unlawful legislation—it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise.

We must ensure that the legacy mechanisms in place are fair, lawful and proportionate, and we are working hard to ensure that veterans' welfare and legal services are provided, so that anyone involved in any of the investigations gets the support they require and we can minimise the impact on this unique group of veterans. As we replace the previous Government's woeful legacy Act, we will prioritise and strengthen the protections to ensure the dignity and respect of veterans, and I know that my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office will look forward to further discussions on this issue should the Petitions Committee grant a debate.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It has often been said that the courts rejected the legacy Act, at least in part. I am not aware of which part specifically they rejected, but I would like to remind the ministerial team that in 2017 the then Defence Committee examined in great detail whether it would be legal to have a statute of limitation that would put an end to these prosecutions. Four professors of law, including Philippe Sands, agreed that it would be, as long as there was an investigative process, possibly embodied in a truth recovery process. When the Government bring forward whatever alternative legislation to the legacy Act they propose, will they make sure that a statute of limitation is part of it?

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. He and I have had many long discussions about issues that the Committee discussed when he chaired it, and I am aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) may have interest in this as Chair of the Committee today. I will ensure that my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office who are leading on that work have heard those remarks.

Mr Francois: Well, 131,000 people do not agree with what the Minister just said, clearly. If he is so confident in the Government's case, can he say on the record that he would welcome their proposals being debated in Parliament for at least three hours before the summer recess? Presumably he is not frightened of a debate, so could he put that on the record?

Luke Pollard: I already had, before the right hon. Gentleman intervened—it was the last line I said before giving way to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). I think there is a good issue that needs to be debated. This place should debate issues of concern to the British people, and it should also be the forum where we challenge and test those arguments. Indeed, the courts have already tested the legacy Act and found it to be unlawful. That is why any Government would need to look at it again—indeed, our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office are doing so—and I am happy to confirm that any Bill would be brought forward to the House for such a discussion.

I turn to the whistleblowing protections, which were raised by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) and the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford. I agree that the term “whistleblower” exists elsewhere in law. However, as I said, simply using the term in the Bill as proposed by the Opposition's Lords amendments 2 and 3 would have no practical legal effects and would provide no protections that do not already exist or are not provided for in the Government amendment in lieu. Indeed, the Government amendment goes further than the Opposition amendments. In relation to practical effect, there is no difference between what is proposed and what is already in the Bill.

However, I entirely accept the spirit in which both Members raised that important issue. We know that there are issues in terms of culture in our armed forces. The Defence Secretary and the whole team in the Ministry of Defence have been clear that there is no place for those issues, and we are making culture change. Indeed, the fact that our senior officers have made similar statements show that from the top to the bottom of our armed forces, there is no place for any abuse, and a

[Luke Pollard]

zero-tolerance policy must take that seriously. I am not certain that Lords amendments 2 and 3 would have much legal effect, and the Government amendment goes further.

However, I welcome this debate and the opportunity we have as a Parliament to put on record our strong cross-party support for a zero-tolerance approach. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford is pointing at the empty Reform Benches, which he made a strong argument about earlier. I am not a golf player—as a hockey player, I have only one stick, and I believe a few more are needed in golf.

The strong cross-party position—or the position of all parties represented here today, I should say—is that there is no place for abuse in our armed forces or a culture of intimidation. The powers contained in the Bill provide an opportunity for people to raise concerns outside the chain of command. That is what the Government's amendment in lieu also seeks to do, recognising that, in addition to the commitments I have given to the House today, we can further strengthen the Bill. With that in mind, I commend the Bill to the House.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2.

The House divided: Ayes 319, Noes 180.

Division No. 207]

[2.23 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan

Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James

Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggum, Michelle
 Sewards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy

Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gen Kitchen and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte

Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Ellie
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Eastwood, Sorchia
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron

Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin

Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 2 disagreed to.

2.37 pm

More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords amendments, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 3.—(Luke Pollard.)

The House divided: Ayes 315, Noes 184.

Division No. 208]

[2.37pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena

Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim

Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim

Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah

Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Taiwo Owatemi and
Gen Kitchen

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib

Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Ellie
 Cleverly, rh Sir James

Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen

Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Gagan Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin

Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 3 disagreed to.

Clause 4

COMMISSIONER'S FUNCTIONS IN RELATION TO
 GENERAL SERVICE WELFARE

Amendment (a) proposed in lieu of Lords amendments 2 and 3.—(Luke Pollard.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 329, Noes 101.

Division No. 209]

[2.50 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn

Byrne, Ian
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Chowns, Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Easton, Alex
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah

Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz

Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah

Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth

Stevens, rh Jo
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gen Kitchen and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart

Argar, rh Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve

Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Burghart, Alex
 Cartledge, James
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Mims
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Mak, Alan

Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pochin, Sarah
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Andrew Snowden and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendments 2 and 3.

Lords amendments 4 to 7 agreed to.

Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Lords message

Before Clause 138

STATEMENT AND BRINGING FORWARD OF A DRAFT BILL:
COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT, AI MODELS, AND
TRANSPARENCY OVER INPUTS

3.3 pm

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 49F.

I am tempted to start with a quote from “Macbeth”—
“When shall we three meet again?”—

because I notice there is a similar cast to our previous debates, but let me start by dispelling some misconceptions. We are not, contrary to what some have stated, changing UK copyright laws to the detriment of the creative industries. If the Government’s Bill is adopted, not a single word of copyright law will have changed in the United Kingdom. It will be as robust as it ever was. In fact, we have said repeatedly that creators should share in the value of this new technology, and we support artificial intelligence developers paying for the content that they use. We want to see more licensing of and proper remuneration for UK content.

We are not undermining copyright owners’ control over their work. We have said from the beginning that we want intellectual property owners to have more control over the use of their works. Some said in the House of Lords yesterday that we have not listened to them or to the creative industries, but that is simply not true. We have heard loud and clear the message from the creative industries and from others. That is why we put reporting commitments on the face of the Bill at a previous round, and we have committed to adding two further reporting requirements on approaches to models trained overseas and on enforcement. We have committed to delivering reports and impact assessments within nine rather than 12 months, and the Bill will require the Secretary of State to make a progress statement to Parliament about the impact assessment and reports within six months of Royal Assent.

It is also why the Secretary of State, who is sitting by me now, stated clearly that although we went into the consultation with a preferred option, we have heard the reaction to that. We want to consider the consultation responses in full, and—to quote him precisely—

“When we went into the consultation, I believed that opting out could have offered an opportunity to bring both sides together, but I now accept that that is not the case.”—[*Official Report*, 22 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 1233.]

As I have said, the Government have listened at every stage.

As I have explained to the House previously, the Bill was never intended to be about artificial intelligence, intellectual property and copyright. What we have is a Bill that will harness data for economic growth, improve public services and support modern digital government. We want to get the legislation on the statute book as fast as we possibly can.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Of course, it would be a delight.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: If only I believed the Minister. I pick up the frustration in his tone, and I appreciate that this must be exhausting for him, because this is the fourth time that the Government have been defeated on this issue in the other place. I understand that he just wants to get this piece of legislation done, but this time it only requires the Government to come forward with a plan to implement transparency before it is too late. He says that our copyright law is robust and that he is not seeking to undermine it—it is robust, but it is being ignored. How long will it take before the Government hold the AI companies to account for what is effectively the biggest copyright heist in history? How long will it take before the Government clamp down on what is basically the whitewashing of the behaviour of big tech? Who is really pulling the strings here?

Chris Bryant: Well, nobody is pulling my strings. I do not know what that final reference was to. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady and the Select Committee, who have done important work in this field. Some of what we have committed to in previous rounds of ping-pong in this House has sprung directly from what her Select Committee asked us to do. We will continue to listen to that. As she knows, we have always said, right from the beginning, that a key aspect of any package we bring forward would be something around transparency.

I will come on to the precise matters in the new clause before us, and I hope that might explain why we are urging the House to reject the amendment today. It is a delight to hear from the hon. Lady, and she need not doubt me.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Another delight.

Robin Swann: I know that the Minister does mean it in this case. He talks about the speed of moving this legislation on to the statute book. I note that legislative consent motions are in from the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, but as yet there is not one from the Northern Ireland Assembly. Can he give me clarification as to what implication that legislative consent motion not being in place will have for those businesses and individuals in Northern Ireland who will be affected by this legislation?

Chris Bryant: I have spoken to Ministers in Northern Ireland, and they have already laid that legislative consent motion. My understanding is that that process will be fully done in time for Royal Assent, so he need not worry. We have sorted that one out, too.

I promised the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), that I was about to come on to the precise details of the amendment, so I will address that. First, as Baroness Jones of Whitchurch, my noble colleague, said in the Lords yesterday,

“the Government’s report on the use of copyright work in the development of AI systems will address two additional areas, specifically highlighted by the noble Baroness’s original amendment”—the one that we are now considering—

“how to deal with models trained overseas; and how rules should be enforced and by whom.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 June 2025; Vol. 846, c. 481.]

We will do subsection (1) of the new clause as part of our report and economic impact assessment. In other words, we have already committed to do half of what is in the amendment, and I would therefore argue that that half is unnecessary.

The second part of the new clause is problematic, and I think it would be problematic for any Government. It requires the Government to produce a draft Bill on copyright and AI according to a specific timetable. It lays out elements that that Bill must include and determines how it should be considered by this House. I cannot think of any Bill in our history that has included such a clause, for very good reason. A central plank of parliamentary sovereignty is that no Parliament can bind its successor. That does not just mean from one Parliament to another; it means that one Session of Parliament cannot bind a future Session. However, the Kidron amendment says that, for instance, the draft Bill “must make provision for enforcement”.

What happens if it does not do so, or if the measures it includes for enforcement are not sufficient in some people’s minds? Where would that be adjudicated? How would it be decided?

Dame Caroline Dinenage: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will just finish this point, if the hon. Lady will allow me. In addition, we are still working through a huge number of consultation responses. To prescribe a draft Bill in detail at this point would completely undermine that process and the policy work that is taking place. I would argue that not only is that bad policymaking, but it would completely disregard the input that so many respondents to the consultation have exhausted so much effort in providing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Gosport, and then to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith).

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I think the Minister for giving way, but I think he is dancing on the head of a pin. The fact is that all legislation somehow binds those who are coming down the track, and others have spoken on many occasions about the urgency of bringing forward measures to provide transparency about what of people’s intellectual property is being scraped right now. I cannot understand why the Government are taking this position. This amendment is not asking for much; it is just asking for the Government to have a plan to sort this out in short order.

Chris Bryant: Of course, I understand the demand for us to act as swiftly as we possibly can, and that is our intention. One could argue that introducing a draft Bill, which would then be considered in various different places and presumably would be followed by a Bill, would delay things rather than speed them up. In addition—this is a really important constitutional point—as I said earlier, I am not aware of a single Bill in the past that has required a future Bill to be produced and specified things that must be in it.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Bryant: I have got to give way to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon first, but then of course I will come back to my hon. Friend.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way. The essential point is that the creative industry is desperate to get a hook within this Bill to reassure it that this vacuuming up of its intellectual property will be controlled. The problem with all the commitments, the working groups and all the words that the Minister is saying is that they do not give the creative industry that reassurance. Yesterday’s debate was passionate about the need—somehow, in whatever way the Government want—to give the creative industry reassurance that this issue will be dealt with within a set timeframe.

Chris Bryant: I understand the concern of the creative industries—they have expressed it to me in no uncertain terms on many occasions, both individually and in larger groups. We have heard the message loud and clear. I think some people have been labouring under the misconception that this Bill is doing something to undermine copyright. I know that the right hon. Gentleman listened to the debate in the House of Lords yesterday, because I was standing next to him, listening to the fullness of the debate as a courtesy to the House of Lords.

As I have said before, I worry that to legislate on a part of this issue, rather than the whole of it, is a mistake. For the sake of argument, let us say that we only legislated in relation to what transparency should be required and did not come up with an enforcement measure. What would happen if the companies simply refused to provide that information? Would we have to introduce a new offence of not providing such information? What would we have to do? That is my argument for why I think—notwithstanding the clamour for us to go as fast as we possibly can, which I fully understand—we need to get it right and to legislate in the round, rather than just piecemeal on the back of a Bill that is not meant to deal with these matters at all.

I heard my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) attempt to intervene earlier.

Ms Billington: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I understand that he is being extremely patient in these circumstances. May I draw his attention to something that happened before 2010? I know that that was a long time ago, but both he and I are old enough—and, indeed, ugly enough—to remember those times.

When Lord Mandelson was Secretary of State at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, what was then known as the Napster clause was included in the then Digital Economy Bill. That was done precisely to give reassurance to the music industry that if, later on, downloading became so problematic that the music industry was going to be hollowed out, the Government would give themselves the power to act. If my hon. Friend is giving the Government the power to report, surely it would be right for the Government to give themselves the power to act once they have received evidence that something is going wrong, enabling them to enforce the copyright law that we all now agree is clear and should therefore be enforced.

3.15 pm

Chris Bryant: I will start with my hon. Friend's very last point, which is that we all agree that copyright law is clear—we do. I hope people understand that the Government's position is clear that copyright law is clear. I do not think that is in doubt.

Secondly, of course, we always have the power to introduce legislation. However, certainly if I were sitting on the Opposition Benches, I would doubt whether it would be right to introduce transparency requirements solely on the basis of secondary legislation, which—as I say—would probably have to contain some sort of enforcement mechanism and potentially a new offence. I would say, “Secondary legislation is unamendable—it is take it or leave it. That would be problematic.”

While again I understand the desire for us to move as swiftly as possible, I reiterate that I think it is better for us to legislate in the round, taking all of the subject matter into consideration. Some matters have not even been mentioned in this debate, such as what we do about the copyright that pertains to AI-created material. Should that material have any protection, or no protection? Should it follow the person who created the AI large language model, or should it stick with the person who asked the AI large language model the question?

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) is quite right: back in 2010, the Napster provision was first enacted through the Digital Economy Act. Such provision is possible, and I just do not understand the Minister's reticence about this amendment. It seems an entirely reasonable amendment to bring forward—it does everything that everybody wants to achieve when it comes to this Bill. Even if the Minister is not prepared to accept the amendment, could he at least say that he accepts the principles of it and what it requires, and that he will do all he can to bring forward all the provisions it asks for?

Chris Bryant: I am trying to be tidy in the way I respond to people, so first, I note that I did not respond to the Napster point. Quite a lot of people have made the point to me that we got from Napster to Spotify. There are many problems with Spotify that many musicians, record labels and so on have raised with me, but at least it is better than people taking stuff for nothing. There is an argument—a strong argument, I would say—that in this debate, we want to move from Napster to Spotify, or to something even better than Spotify. I am not sure precisely how we get there, but I am absolutely certain that we need to legislate in the round for all of these issues.

The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) asked me about the principles of the noble Baroness Kidron's amendment. Of course we believe in transparency—we are fully subscribed to wanting to provide that. That has always been part of the package that we have wanted to present. There is still the question of what enforcement would look like, and many other issues that any Bill that comes forward would need to address. I am hesitant about introducing a draft Bill, because a draft Bill would take longer to go through.

We want to be able to legislate in this area as soon as we possibly can, but we also want to have listened to and borne in mind the full panoply of the responses.

People may presume that they know what the 11,500 responses will say, but actually, they are much more diverse. I am not saying that everybody is clamouring for what the Government have laid out; I am just saying that those responses address a diversity of issues, all of which we need to address.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way again, as he has on so many occasions during these debates, and for his ongoing engagement in these matters, but does he agree that if the Government do not act now to enforce the law, we will basically be allowing what everyone already sees as theft to continue? Would he accept that in any other industry, such as retail or farming?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is entirely right about the issue of enforcement, although traditionally it is not for Governments to enforce the law. It is for the courts to do that, although in certain circumstances when there has been a breach of the criminal law, it will be for the prosecuting authorities to consider. In a way this makes my point, which is that it is all very well to legislate on transparency requirements, but if there are no enforcement measures it will not make the blindest bit of difference. All this has to be done in the round.

We have already said that we want to engage with the creative sector and, of course, the technology sector as much as we can. We believe that such engagement will help to chart the way forward on both transparency and technical standards, and possibly on technical solutions to the problem. It may be that the working groups bring other benefits, such as interim voluntary arrangements, until longer-term solutions can be agreed on and implemented. However, we must see what comes of the process rather than imposing preconditions at this early stage.

For all those reasons, I urge Members to vote against the Lords amendment. The first part of the proposed new clause is a helpful addition to the work that we will do and are now committed to doing, but the lion's share of it would lead to what I believe is confusing law and constitutionally uncertain.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I echo the comments of my hon. Friends about how open and engaging both the Minister and the Secretary of State have been on this issue. As for the consideration of working groups, can the Minister confirm that the Government's policy is to ensure that both sides are in the room at the same time, with the Minister and the Secretary of State? This has been rehearsed before; the last Government failed, and talks broke down. May I urge this Government please to ensure that both voices hear each other? Their job is to manage that process, as well as leading it.

Chris Bryant: I agree 100%. There would be absolutely no point in not having both sides—indeed, I would say several sides—of the argument in the room at the same time. Yesterday morning I had an interesting conversation with someone who is very prominent on the music scene. He told me, in granular detail, what we would need to do for transparency in the music sector, but added that obviously it would be completely different for the publishing sector. That is the kind of detail we will have to go into. If we are to bring about a licensing regime that really works, it will have to work differently

for sound, music, words and images, which means that we will have to have all those people around the table, as well as AI—not just “big tech”, a phrase that was used frequently in their lordships’ House yesterday, but tech from the UK. That is a very important part of what we need to be promoting. So yes, I can guarantee to my hon. Friend that we will have everyone in the room, and also that we want to get on with it as soon as we possibly can—

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD) *rose*—

Chris Bryant: And I want to be able to sit down as soon as I possibly can, but I am being prevented from doing so.

Mike Martin: The Minister is being extremely generous, as he always is. I pressed him on this point on the last occasion when we met across the Chamber, but some time has passed since then. He speaks of dealing with the issue “in the round”, which is a sentiment that I understand, but when? Can he give a timetable?

Chris Bryant: “As soon as possible”, I am afraid. I know that there are lots of parliamentary terms for these matters, such as “imminently” and “soon” and so on. The difficulty is that there are plenty of other priorities for legislation at the same time. I am not the Leader of the House, so I fear that I cannot give a guarantee about a timeline, but we have given some guarantees about when the Secretary of State will report back to the House—within six months of Royal Assent, and I hope that that is within six months of “soon”—and we have given guarantees about our other reports back, which will be within nine months, shortened from 12 months.

Dame Caroline Dinenage *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I will give way to the hon. Lady, and then I will try to crack on.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I thank the Minister for giving way again: he is being very generous. He has spoken about trying to bring the AI sector together with the creative industries. The last Government tried that in response to the text and data mining exception. They formed an AI working group, which, as the Minister knows, fell into abeyance because the AI companies did not engage. Does he think that that could be a problem this time, and has he heard any signals from the big tech companies that they would be more forthcoming with their engagement in response to this attempt?

Chris Bryant: We will make sure that they engage. In a strange way, I think that the campaign that has been led by the hon. Lady and others, in the House of Lords and elsewhere, will help to make people engage in what will not necessarily be an easy process, but one that I think could deliver a win-win for us in the UK and could potentially enable us to lead for other countries in the world. Every indication that we have had thus far suggests that everyone wants to sit in the room together, and, of course, we will have to provide significant leadership in those meetings to be able to drive them forward. As I said on the last occasion when I was talking about these matters at the Dispatch Box, I should like to be able to get on with that as soon as possible, but we have a duty to get the Bill out of the way first.

Let me now say a few words about ping-pong. As Members will know, this is in large measure the same Bill that was presented, twice, by the previous Government. The second Bill fell at the general election, but both major parties committed themselves to reintroducing it, in a broadly similar form, in the new Parliament. None of the parties intended to introduce any matters relating to copyright into the Bill when they discussed it in the run-up to, and during, the general election.

I warmly commend those who are fighting the corner of the creative industries—of course I do; I am the creative industries Minister—but there comes a point at which the Lords is barring the Commons from fulfilling a pledge made by both major parties. We shall now be entering the fourth round of ping-pong. Few Bills in our history have gone this many rounds. In the cases of the Prevention of Terrorism Bill of 2004-05 and the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Bill 2006-07, at issue was what the Government had put in rather than what it had not included. Neither of those Bills had been openly advocated by both main parties at a general election. By tradition, the House of Lords does not interfere with Bills to which Governments have committed themselves at the time of a general election. Everyone agrees that this Bill is a valuable piece of legislation, and for that reason I urge their lordships to let it pass into law.

Sir Julian Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Oh, all right.

Sir Julian Smith: The Minister was present at yesterday’s debate. Their lordships were acutely aware of not wanting to fetter the House of Commons, but at the same time they are trying to represent thousands of people who are desperate about their incomes. I think it worth putting on the record here that all those who spoke were very aware of what they were doing, but on balance felt that fighting for the underdog was the best thing to do.

Chris Bryant: I am not making an criticism of any individual Member of the House of Lords. I listened to the debate, and it was clear that people felt passionately and were arguing entirely in good faith. I fully understand that. As I have said, however, this a Bill that was not intended to include elements relating to AI and copyright. In the last Parliament it was supported by the Conservative party and by us on the Opposition Benches, and was referred to by both sides during our general election campaigns. Neither of us said that we were going to include anything about copyright in the Bill, but that is what is now holding up Royal Assent. There are economic benefits that would flow from the Bill, but they will of course be delayed if we further delay Royal Assent.

Let me end by saying that, as I think I have said several times, I fully understand the concerns expressed by people in the creative industries about artificial intelligence. Many use it already, but they are understandably concerned about where it will go, and they fear for their jobs. It is true that, for many, the strikes in the US had an even more cataclysmic effect on their careers, but I would just add one corrective to those fears. There is a moment at the end of “The Winter’s Tale” when Paulina takes Leontes to see a statue of his wife, who he thinks died of grief when he falsely accused of her adultery many years earlier. We all know when we watch it in the theatre that the statue

[Chris Bryant]

is actually the actress playing Hermione; it is not a statue at all. Yet the moment when Leontes touches the statue and says, “O, she’s warm!”, still shocks us and brings tears to our eyes. Why? Because it is human to human. Yes, of course it is artifice laid upon artifice, but it is humanity face to face that really moves us. The Government have heard the concerns expressed by this House and the other place, and we have set out our plans to address them. I believe the Bill must be allowed to run its course.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

3.30 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Back again, and it feels a bit like groundhog day. I must confess that I am a Bill Murray fan, and I think “Groundhog Day” is a great movie. However, I realise that some Members on both sides of the House may not have been born when it was released, which makes me feel a little old, so I will explain a little of the plot. A weatherman set in his ways is sent to a town in Pennsylvania to report on groundhog day, and finds himself in a time loop in which he lives the same day over and over again. In due course, that leads to despair, but eventually he learns that this gives him the opportunity to learn from his mistakes—the time loops can be seen as a blessing or an opportunity, not a curse—and through this he grows, develops and changes. He then breaks out of the time loop to live happily ever after.

We will be stuck in groundhog day on this Bill until the Government realise that the Lords amendments are not a nuisance, but an opportunity, and that they need to listen to the concerns and change course. The noble Lords in the House in which this Bill started have made clear the risk to creatives from AI companies taking their data, and the importance of fairness and transparency. We on the Opposition Benches and Members on both sides of the House have raised similar concerns, but we do not have the numbers yet. In Parliament, it is not sufficient to win the vote; it is also necessary to win the argument, and the Government have lost this argument.

Copyright law is a toothless instrument if the lack of transparency about the use of creative content in AI models continues. The lack of transparency renders the enforcement of rights elusive, and the Government are apparently happy for this to persist on an open-ended basis. While the Government’s direction of travel remains uncertain, everyone loses out. Creatives continue to lose out when their work is exploited without payment. Firms in the AI industry, especially smaller ones, cannot get out of the starting blocks, let alone play their part in turbocharging our tech economy. The Government continue to risk the confidence of both these key industries, with the chilling effect on investment that this entails.

Of course, we are sensitive to the constitutional principles, and noble Lords were very mindful of that topic in their speeches in the other place. The Minister is right that it is almost unprecedented for the other place to return to a Bill so many times. However, rather than use this as a reason to try to push through the Bill, the Government need to listen to that evidence of the strength of feeling. We all know that the Government will have to respond to these concerns, and their position will have to change.

I would love to end this speech with a literary quote suited to the substance of the debate, and I envy the Minister’s ability always to bring flair to our discussions across the Dispatch Box. Instead, I will fall back on a political one from the 38th American President, Gerald Ford:

“Compromise is the oil that makes governments go.”

The Government should meet the Lords on the compromise they have offered, put oil in the engines of our creative and AI industries, and bring an end to this groundhog day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Here we are again. Once again, I would like to thank those in the other place who have worked so hard on these amendments, and indeed Members across the House who have stood up for creatives. We are back here again two weeks later to discuss and vote on Lords amendment 49F to secure the rights of creatives in the changing face of AI.

What has changed in those two weeks? An awful lot actually. Forty eight hours before we voted on the amendment on 20 May, the latest big AI tech launch occurred when Google launched Veo 3—literally an all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing AI video creator, the like of which we have never seen before. Seeing is believing, and even when you see it, you will not always be able to believe that what you are seeing is not real. The emotions of the characters created by binary code, a series of zeros and ones, have already had me laughing, feeling and thinking; their jokes like a stand-up comedian, the light of the sunset comparable to standing at the Ashridge beech woods as a perfect day’s golden hour arrives, the tangible fear of the binary character representing the actress, the director and the artist questioning what this means for them. The engineering, the development and, dare I say it, the creativity that has gone into developing such software is epic. There is no denying that, but I cannot help but wonder if all the value came from the engineering and the computing. What about the period dramas, the beauty of children’s illustration, the wit of the one-liner and the fast-paced thrillers that have helped to train this cinematic experience at the touch of a prompt?

As far as I can discover, Google representatives have previously mentioned that, as well as publicly available content, YouTube may have been used to train the model. I wonder how many must feel, seeing their creations replicated. Of course, this is just one example of the AI developments happening every minute. The alarm bell that creatives have been ringing has come to fruition a thousand times over. As much as I am sure that many creatives are excited about the possibilities, many will be questioning the implications for their industry, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. Just this afternoon, I spoke to creatives from the Creators’ Rights Alliance, who have proof of their works being essentially copied against their will. Artists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, singers and songwriters are watching their life’s work swallowed up.

I have not even spoken about Lyria, which writes music, or the thousands of other developments coming out of AI—incredible developments that we must celebrate, but we must also ensure that the creative work that has

gone into it is also valued. While technology moves at pace, our frameworks for accountability have not kept up. In this moment, as artificial intelligence reshapes how creative works are used, adjusted and commercialised, the time for reflection is behind us. I appreciate the Government talking about protecting rights and the actions they are taking, but the time for real action is now. That is why I urge Members across the House to vote for Lords amendment 49F, to ensure transparency of business data is used in relation to AI models, a proportionate approach that calls to establish transparency. I urge the Government to also move at pace to protect creators' rights with a plan and with everyone around the table, something we have heard across the House today.

As I walked around Little Gaddesden arts fair this weekend, I saw the bright colours and joy that had been created by Sally Bassett, Alison Bateson and Andrew Dixon. Right at the end of the road, Little Gaddesden village hall is where parts of "The Crown" were filmed. I thought of the legendary story about Picasso, which many Members may know. At a Parisian market, an admirer approached Picasso and asked if he could do a quick sketch on a napkin. He kindly obliged, creating art on the napkin. He handed it back to her, but not before asking for 1 million francs. "But it only took you five minutes," barked the admirer. "No," Picasso replied, "it took me 40 years to be able to draw this in five minutes."

Given that prompts can create art, whether song, print, film or story, in seconds, who is being remunerated for the years of work that have gone into it? I urge Members across the House to vote for Lords amendment 49F. We must find a solution to ensure that human creativity is truly valued.

Sir Julian Smith: First, the Ministers, who I like personally and rate a lot, unfortunately do not control the timetable of Government business. Secondly, they do not have a Bill in the King's Speech. Thirdly, my prediction is that they will be promoted before this new Bill comes to pass.

The speeches were honest, but what they exposed is that there is no time commitment whatever from those on the Government Benches to bring back a Bill to this House to address the current property theft raining down on the UK creative industries. That is why the creative industries and the debate in the other place, which we listened to yesterday, are so passionate. Theft of the property rights of composers, writers, filmmakers and other creatives have been happening for years. They continue to happen and will continue to happen until the new Bill comes forward; greater and greater volumes of intellectual property and hard-fought rights falling into the AI hopper never to be seen again, and no system of redress other than expensive legal action to get it back. How would we feel if it was our own property, business or land—if it was removed without us even being asked, with the gentle reassurance that we could take action retrospectively?

Creatives are desperate. Most do not have the workers' rights the majority of us have, or things such as pensions or holiday pay; all they have is their intellectual property rights. Where will the incentive be now to toil for weeks, months and years creating a piece of music or writing a text, only to have it snatched away when success arrives?

There is an irony, with the Government returning shortly with the Employment Rights Bill, that creative workers' rights continue to be so eroded.

The transparency amendment in front of us today is a much diluted version of the previous Kidron amendments sent to us from the other place. It sets out a clear timeline for when the Government must return with a Bill, which is a modest request; the Government will still be able to delay the Bill, should they want to, and, to be honest, the creative industries will still not have the opportunity to protect their works in the meantime.

The amendment should be accepted because it will provide reassurance to a key UK sector. However, it should also be accepted as an example of our two Chambers respecting each other. No one in the debate yesterday, listening to the words of Baroness Kidron, Lord Forsyth or others, could feel they were trying to cause the Government problems. Each and every supporter of the amendment did so on the basis of support for the rights of those working in one of the UK's leading economic sectors, who are pleading with us for their survival and to work positively with this new technological development.

Our politics is currently jam-packed with black and white positions and an instinct to jump to disagreement and polarisation. The Lords amendment before us today represents a modest proposal to disagree well, and the Government should accept it.

Pete Wishart: I was not going to say anything in this round of ping pong, but a couple of things in the debate have tempted me to my feet. The first thing I want to say is about the House of Lords. I have to say that I congratulate their lordships on their tenacity on this issue; I think we both expected and presumed that they would have backed down a long time ago, but they have decided not to, and I think that is because of what I have heard today. They are backing the sector. It has been left to the Lords to ensure that the voices of our artists and those in our creative industries and sectors are adequately articulated and presented to Ministers, so I congratulate them on that. I say that as somebody who is no great respecter of the House of Lords—I have this cute little notion that someone serving in a legislature should be elected to that legislature.

The Lords have done an exemplary job in all this, and they are entirely entitled to bring forward this matter again and again until the ministerial team find some sort of compromise, which, between the two of them, they will surely be able to do. This is the territory we are in now; this is the fourth round of ping pong. It is no good us just sending it back to the Lords again and again. The Government can insist and get their way, of course: they are the Government, and this is the primary House in our Parliament, so they can do that if they want. But why would they not sit down and work out a way forward that takes on board everything the Lords want to achieve and secure and that meets the noble ambitions and lofty rhetoric we have heard from those on the Government Front Bench today and the last few times this has been debated?

I cannot see anything wrong with the amendment. It sounds like the Minister is inventing reasons as to why it could not be agreed to. The example from the Digital Economy Act is spot on: we were adaptable and did things as the situation required in order to meet the

[Pete Wishart]

challenge of the time—a huge challenge, when digitisation was coming into our creative arts. This is a bigger challenge and test. This is more existential than the Digital Economy Act of 20 years ago, and that is why we must act now. People cannot wait.

Our cultural heritage is being scraped and hoovered up by large tech companies, and soon there will be nothing left of it. Millions of creative artists are waiting for the Government to engage—to sort it out, compromise and do something with those with an interest in all this. The Government are convincing no one thus far; the creative industries do not believe that they have their best interests at heart or that we will have enough time to secure what is left of our cultural heritage.

The Government should do something—do not just send the Bill away again, although they probably will, and have it come back to us. Sit down, compromise and get something sorted out and, for the sake of our creative industries, find a solution that works for everybody.

Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 49F.

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 185.

Division No. 210]

[3.44 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack	Buckley, Julia
Abrahams, Debbie	Burton-Sampson, David
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Butler, Dawn
Akehurst, Luke	Byrne, rh Liam
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Caliskan, Nesil
Aldridge, Dan	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Campbell, Irene
Ali, Rushanara	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Ali, Tahir	Carling, Sam
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Carns, Al
Anderson, Callum	Champion, Sarah
Anderson, Fleur	Coleman, Ben
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Collier, Jacob
Arthur, Dr Scott	Collins, Tom
Asato, Jess	Conlon, Liam
Asser, James	Coombes, Sarah
Athwal, Jas	Cooper, Andrew
Atkinson, Catherine	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Cooper, rh Yvette
Baines, David	Costigan, Deirdre
Baker, Alex	Cox, Pam
Baker, Richard	Coyle, Neil
Bance, Antonia	Craft, Jen
Barker, Paula	Creagh, Mary
Barron, Lee	Curtis, Chris
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Baxter, Johanna	Dalton, Ashley
Beales, Danny	Darlington, Emily
Beavers, Lorraine	Davies, Jonathan
Betts, Mr Clive	Davies, Paul
Billington, Ms Polly	Davies, Shaun
Bishop, Matt	Davies-Jones, Alex
Blake, Olivia	Dean, Josh
Blake, Rachel	Dearden, Kate
Bloore, Chris	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Dickson, Jim
Bonavia, Kevin	Dixon, Anna
Botterill, Jade	Dixon, Samantha
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Dowd, Peter
Bryant, Chris	Downie, Graeme

Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul (*Proxy vote cast by Lorraine Beavers*)
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike

Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren

Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair

Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gen Kitchen and
Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty

Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Ellie
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy

Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Eastwood, Sorchia
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James

MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McDonnell, rh John
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Zöe Franklin*)
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt

Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wishart, Pete

Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr Will Forster and
 Charlie Maynard

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 49F disagreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 49F;

That Chris Bryant, Anna Turley, Callum Anderson, Luke Myer, Adam Jodge, Dr Ben Spencer and Victoria Collins be members of the Committee;

That Chris Bryant be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Chris Elmore.*)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

MEDICINES

That the draft Human Medicines (Amendments Relating to Hub and Spoke Dispensing etc.) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.—(*Chris Elmore.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee may be proceeded with for up to two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order, or until 7.00pm, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; those proceedings may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Backbench Business

Dementia Care

4 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered dementia care.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate and Members for supporting it, as well as the charities and organisations that have provided material. Dementia is undoubtedly one of the most urgent health and care challenges facing our society, and I know that most of us in this Chamber will know someone affected by it. My family is currently battling it on two fronts. My confident, witty, generous father-in-law is now almost unrecognisable as the man he used to be. He is lucky to be living in a lovely care home where he receives the best care possible, but the decision to move him there was heartbreaking. My brilliant, funny cousin, always the life and soul of family parties, was diagnosed far too early with frontotemporal dementia, which is likely to affect her ability to communicate over time—a particularly cruel diagnosis for someone so young. Watching people we love become confused by the world around them, unable to communicate and fading away from us while so physically present is heart-wrenching. Dementia has to be one of the cruellest conditions for those afflicted and for those supporting them.

As we are neatly placed between Dementia Week and Carers Week, it is fitting that we should discuss this condition with which 900,000 people in the UK are living, most over the age of 65. Dementia is now the leading cause of death in the UK, and while its scale is national, its impact is deeply local and personal. It is already widespread as our population ages, and that number is expected to rise sharply. According to NHS England, one in 11 people over the age of 65 has dementia, and that rises to one in six for those over 80. In Devon, which has one of the oldest populations in England, this issue is not just coming; it is already here. Unless we act now to improve diagnosis, care and support, we will fail tens of thousands of families in our communities.

A timely diagnosis is not just about putting a name to a condition; it is also the essential first step towards accessing care, planning for the future and, increasingly, receiving treatment. New disease-modifying drugs for Alzheimer's offer real hope, but only if the disease is caught early and diagnosed accurately. In October 2023, the all-party parliamentary group on dementia published a report highlighting the significant regional disparities in dementia diagnosis across England. The findings were stark. While Stoke-on-Trent had the highest diagnosis rate, at 90%, the South Hams—much of which lies in my constituency of South Devon—had the lowest rate nationally, at just 44%.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): As a fellow South Hams representative, I wonder whether the hon. Lady would agree that the Government's lack of focus and targets for dementia diagnosis is having a particular impact on rural constituencies such as ours, given that treatment is so dependent on diagnosis. Does she also agree that the work of local groups such as the

Dementia Friendly Parishes around the Yealm is going to be vital to increasing diagnosis in our communities in Devon?

Caroline Voaden: I thank the hon. Member for her contribution, and I agree that community groups such as the one around the Yealm are vital in caring for people with dementia.

Devon as a whole is falling worryingly behind. As of March 2025, our county's dementia diagnosis rate stands well below the national average, placing Devon 39th out of 42 NHS systems in England. At the same time, demand for services is increasing sharply. Referrals to the Devon memory service have surged by 94% of the past five years, yet no additional investment has been made to meet this rising need. In Torbay the pressure is especially acute, with some individuals now waiting up to 20 weeks for an assessment.

A diagnosis can change lives. It provides clarity, access to support and the opportunity to plan for the future. It has proven to help people live well with dementia, but without investment people are being locked out of vital services, including support groups. One local dementia charity told me:

"Until there is a formal diagnosis, patients and their families cannot access our Memory Cafes, as our funding requires a confirmed diagnosis to provide support."

I know from family members that this kind of support can make a world of difference, giving carers contact with others who truly understand the pressures and strain of caring for a much-loved relative who is slowly but surely losing themselves to this awful condition.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): The hon. Member speaks about community groups and their importance. In recent months I have had the pleasure of joining and supporting lots of dementia support groups, including South East London Mind's young onset dementia activists group, Beckenham dementia café, and Beckenham and Penge dementia café, and Angela from Bromley Dementia Friendly Community. Will she join me in acknowledging the incredible acts of kindness that such groups do every single day, so often motivated by their personal experiences of dementia?

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely commend all those groups—the hon. Member is lucky to have so many in his constituency.

Like many other diagnoses that can be equally shocking to receive, dementia has no cure. Approved medications offer limited benefit only in the early stages and not for everyone. For those in the moderate to late stages, the most effective treatments are access to information to navigate the social care system and good-quality care. That means personalised, respectful and consistent support not only for the individual but for their family too, and that family support is critical. Across Devon and beyond, unpaid carers bear the overwhelming weight of responsibility. There is a physical, financial and emotional toll from the moment of diagnosis, yet respite support is sparse and, in many places, non-existent.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I share the hon. Member's deep commitment to ensuring quality care within our communities—something I saw at first hand last year during my visit to Warren Farm

Lodge care home in Kingstanding. The dedication of the staff left a lasting impression. Does she agree that we need to work with the Government to urgently develop a blueprint for transforming dementia diagnosis?

Caroline Voaden: The hon. Member has beaten me to it—I absolutely agree.

The lack of respite support is pushing carers into crisis, and when that happens the result is clear: faster entry into long-term care, increased hospital admissions, more GP appointments and distress for everyone involved.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The hon. Member is absolutely right that respite care is important. In my constituency, Sandhurst day centre offers fantastic respite care, allowing people with dementia to stay as active and as social as possible for as long as possible, which we know also keeps people out of hospital for longer. Does she agree that we need to see more support for day centres such as Sandhurst day centre?

Caroline Voaden: I could not agree more—I am sure I will agree with most of the interventions in this debate.

This does not have to be the outcome. We know that with the right support at the right time, people can live well with dementia at home, and that reduces pressure on services and improves quality of life.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): One in four hospital beds are occupied by someone living with dementia, and there is a 50% higher hospital readmissions rate for those who have dementia than the general population, with one in three people living with the condition never receiving a diagnosis. Does the hon. Member agree that the key is to get that early diagnosis, so that help and support can come in early, which will have better prospects for the individual and their families?

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely agree that early diagnosis is one of the key things that makes a difference to anyone living with dementia.

We talk a lot about social care in this place, and the Liberal Democrats have championed the cause of carers—those thousands of people who quietly and lovingly dedicate themselves to caring for someone they love, often someone suffering from dementia. These carers are, because of the nature of this disease, often elderly themselves and, because of a postcode lottery, are sometimes left to just get on with it themselves without the vital support and advice that they so desperately need.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I echo the hon. Lady's comments about the vital role that family carers and unpaid carers play in enabling people with dementia to live well at home. Does she agree that, in addition to formal respite care, community support from groups in my constituency such as the Wrose Dementia Friendly Community Support Group and Shipley Memories Group is vital to give carers little breaks, when they have an opportunity to get out of the house and meet other carers like them?

Caroline Voaden: Having regular, small chunks of respite is absolutely vital for carers.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): A constituent has written to me to tell me the story of her mother, who was diagnosed with dementia in 2020. Her father was 86 and the primary carer. They spent over £7,000 on five weeks of respite. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to expand respite centres, day centres and home care to ensure that families are not left by themselves?

Caroline Voaden: I could not agree more. If we had little chunks of regular respite care, people would not end up having to pay for several weeks, just to recover from the care that they are providing.

There are some brilliant projects working to support families afflicted by dementia, and several of them have been mentioned already. One of the most inspiring examples that I have seen is the Filo Project, a community interest company that offers dementia support in Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and east Lancashire, and which has recently expanded to Bournemouth. The Filo Project takes its name from the pastry, referring to the many layers that make up a personality—the layers that are cruelly and silently stripped away by dementia. The project provides high-quality, community-based day care for people with early to moderate dementia, and what makes it so powerful is its simple approach: small, weekly group support in the home of a host, where people with dementia spend the day receiving the attention, care and companionship they need. That not only helps them, but provides their families with regular and crucial respite and support. I commend founders Libby Price and Dr Liz Dennis, who I believe is in the Gallery today. It is a model that works, and it has made a tangible difference to many families.

There is a critical need for more community-based initiatives such as the Filo Project, and one of my direct asks of the Minister today is that VAT be removed from such services. Although dementia patients can access goods and services exempt from VAT, they have to pay it on the care provided by the Filo Project and others like it. Families supported by the project have paid more than £700,000 in VAT for care since the group was set up 10 years ago, and the extra cost restricts who can afford to take part, so I urge the Minister to remove this burden. While the Government are facing mounting pressures from all sides to find additional funding, it is worth noting that investing in community-based projects is a fraction of the cost of the NHS, yet the impact is transformational, benefiting families across the country and ultimately saving money.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Like every Member here, I have many constituents who have explained that navigating such a complex web of health and social care services is absolutely exhausting. For many families, it leads to crisis before help arrives. Will the hon. Member join me in calling on the Government to tackle the delays and disparities in dementia diagnosis, and to ensure that there is investment in diagnostic capacity, including the fantastic memory clinics that hon. Members have spoken about today?

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely agree.

In 2023, Devon saw the closure of its dementia advice service after 10 years because of a cut in funding under the previous Government—a decision that left a significant gap in community support across the county. The service

offered vital information, practical advice, and tips and strategies on coping with dementia, as well as signposting to legal and financial support, and the closure was a blow to many families already struggling to cope. It is a scandal that Devon's integrated care board has neglected older adults by cutting a service that was designed to prevent early care home and hospital admission, and to ease pressure on primary care.

However, there is hope on the horizon. Devon has recently developed a new countywide Devon dementia strategy, which aims to bring about real and meaningful change for those living with dementia and their loved ones. Written in collaboration with over 40 organisations, it sets out what is needed in dementia care today and for the foreseeable future, and I commend them for their work. This strategy is vital, and so is the funding to support the measures it highlights. Dementia prevalence in the area covered by Devon's ICB is expected to rise by 54% between 2023 and 2040, and by then, over 33,700 people in Devon will be living with dementia. Now is the moment to act, to ensure that this strategy is not just a document that sits on a shelf but becomes a driving force for better services, earlier diagnosis and more consistent support.

I would like to briefly share the story of one of my constituents, Michael, to illustrate why this is so urgent. Michael's wife began showing signs of dementia six years ago and was diagnosed with moderate to severe Alzheimer's nearly five years ago. As her symptoms worsened, her condition became more difficult to manage, and she was eventually sectioned as being a danger to herself. At that point, the NHS took over her care, and she is now in a home where she is receiving very good care. Michael has nothing but praise for his GP, the older people's mental health team and his local hospital for their support. However, his experience has highlighted critical gaps in the system. He recalls the complete lack of day care facilities to provide respite before his wife went to hospital and the overstretched system that was unable to assess people quickly or provide necessary help, either at home or in day care.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am most grateful to the hon. Member for leading this debate so effectively and raising these important issues. She will be aware that three in four dementia carers have no alternative plans in place if they are unable to provide care. Many of them are terrified about what will happen to their loved ones if they are no longer there to provide care, and nine in 10 have already reached crisis point, with burnout and depression. Does she agree that dementia carers need to be fully supported to put alternative care arrangements in place? May I urge the Minister to implement a carers strategy that sets out carers' rights and what support carers should receive when it comes to alternative provision?

Caroline Voaden: So many thousands of people are doing this care for free, at home, living under this burden and worrying about what will happen if they are no longer there. They deserve recognition and help to put those plans in place, in case something happens to them—that is crucial.

For many families, accessing respite care is a huge challenge. Caring for someone with dementia is often a 24/7 job and is utterly exhausting, yet unpaid carers like

Michael are saving the country billions of pounds and are often doing so without the support they need. Michael echoes the calls I have heard in my own family for the Government to do more to support carers by ensuring they have access to regular respite care. We must also urgently examine the funding and availability of care homes that can support high-needs dementia patients.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for taking so many interventions; it is very welcome. As she will be aware, health is devolved to the Scottish Government, and we Scots have a slightly different system. However, Alzheimer Scotland has called on the Scottish Government to commit to recognising that the needs of people with advanced dementia are healthcare needs and to ensure equality of access to appropriate health and nursing care that is free at the point of delivery, regardless of our geography. Does she agree that that is what we all want for our loved ones?

Caroline Voaden: There is a lack of equity, is there not? I looked at *Hansard*, and dementia has been mentioned 192 times since the general election last year, but cancer has been mentioned nearly 1,000 times—we have spoken about cancer five times more than we have about dementia. That shines a light on what a hidden problem it is, and yet it is not hidden, because we all have experience of it.

We must urgently examine the funding and availability of care homes and find a way to reduce the staggering costs, which can cripple family finances and local authority budgets. House of Commons Library research commissioned by the Liberal Democrats has shown that the cost of care in nursing homes increased by 61% from 2015 to 2022. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the introduction of free personal care in England, based on the model introduced by the party in government in Scotland in 2002, so that provision is based on need, not ability to pay.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The hon. Member is being extremely generous with her time. Is she concerned, along with the Alzheimer's Society, that more than 71% of carers for people with dementia have no formal training whatsoever, although dementia requires very specific care and training? Will she join me in calling on the Government to introduce mandatory training for all those who care for our loved ones with dementia?

Caroline Voaden: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention—I have not quite got there yet, but it is in my speech. We are also calling for a cross-party commission to form a long-term agreement on sustainable funding for social care in England.

Last week I met journalist John Suchet, whose wife Bonnie died of dementia. He is now married to Nula, who lost her husband James to a rare form of dementia known as Pick's disease, diagnosed when he was just 57. John and Nula met in the care home where they were supporting their partners. They supported each other along a terrible journey and have both since written books about their experience. In Nula's book she says:

"Dementia, dementia, what is it? I still know very little. All I know is, it's a bloody cruel, sadistic disease, that has demolished my hopes, plans and dreams. It has taken away my life, twisted it and mangled it, and so it can claim another victim—two for the

price of one...With absolutely no professional support—no-one at all monitoring his or my journey as they would, for instance, a cancer or Parkinson's patient. I am entirely alone."

It should not and must not be like that for the carers who give up everything to look after someone they love.

This is where the Government must step in. We need a clear strategy to support people with dementia and their families at every stage. That starts with an urgent review of NHS continuing healthcare, so that dementia-specific needs, especially cognitive and behavioural needs, are properly recognised, with specialists involved in assessments. No one should face dementia alone. Families must have access to a specialist dementia nurse, regular health and wellbeing reviews, and co-ordinated, joined-up care. We also need a national framework for young onset dementia, ensuring timely diagnosis, tailored support, and fair access to care. To relieve pressure on hospitals, every NHS acute trust should have a specialist dementia nurse service, backed by ringfenced funding.

Investing in dementia support will clearly save the NHS money in the long term. I am sure the Minister knows these statistics, but I will read them out: people with dementia visit the GP three times more often than someone without dementia; 25% of people with dementia living in their own homes are admitted to hospital with a potentially treatable condition; 25% of hospital beds are occupied by people with dementia, and they stay in hospital twice as long as other people aged over 65; and 43% of people with dementia in hospital are there due to urinary tract and chest infections, both of which are treatable at home.

A voluntary, community and social enterprise response to the closure of the Devon adviser service showed that dementia support workers are cost-effective, and that every £1 invested in dementia support worker roles results in almost £4-worth of benefits. Compare that with the cost of a hospital stay. Over 85% of dementia patients with a hip fracture stay for up to 14 days, and 34% for over a month, despite the national average length of stay being just seven days. The extra cost is estimated at around £6,000 per patient. The Alzheimer's Society said between 2015 and 2020,

"almost 336,000 admissions costing almost £1 billion to the NHS were for chest infections, delirium, falls and UTIs, all of which can be prevented or managed well in the community."

Clearly, this is a strong case for invest to save.

Clinical care must go hand in hand with long overdue social care reform. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a comprehensive social care workforce plan, the creation of a royal college of care workers, and a higher carer's minimum wage to reflect the value of this essential work. Unpaid carers also need support, with paid leave, respite breaks, and proper recognition. Finally, we must expand dementia training across the sector, backed by a national care agency to uphold standards and register care workers. The Care Quality Commission has just published a report that underlines the importance of reform. Its findings were alarming, confirming that health and social care staff frequently lack understanding about the specific needs of dementia patients. The Alzheimer's Society estimates that only 29% of paid carers have training in dementia.

Dementia is a growing issue and the system is already under strain. Right now, approximately 30% of general hospital beds in Devon are occupied by people with dementia, many of whom are there because of preventable

[Caroline Voaden]

conditions. A sustainable strategy for dementia care must focus on community-based support, early diagnosis, carer support and workforce training. That is not only the right thing to do; it will save money in the long run. It is time that we treated dementia care not as a burden, but as a vital part of building a compassionate and sustainable future for everyone affected.

4.24 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate, which shines vital light on an issue that affects so many families across this country, especially in my constituency of Redditch and the villages.

Over 900,000 people in the UK are currently living with dementia, and by 2040 that number is expected to rise to 1.6 million. However, the challenge is not just the growing number of people affected, but the poor support that many receive and the inequalities that persist in diagnosis and care. It is estimated that only about 65% of people aged 65 or over who are thought to have dementia actually have a recorded diagnosis, which means that far too many people are missing out on vital help early on. That is especially true in communities including ethnic minorities and in deprived areas.

I have been contacted by many families in Redditch who describe the distress of waiting months—sometimes years—for a diagnosis or clear guidance on what to do next. One particularly heartbreaking aspect is the many families who are forced to sell the home of a parent who no longer knows that they cannot return home. These homes often represent a lifetime of memories, yet families face that heartbreaking decision simply because the system does not provide adequate care options.

A particularly worrying fact cited by Age UK is that 19% of people it spoke to were concerned about accessing dementia services—they did not know where to turn or felt unable to get the support they needed. We also have to confront the huge variation in care home capacity across England's integrated care board areas. In some parts of the country, care home availability simply cannot meet demand, limiting options for people with dementia and their families. This postcode lottery means that some people wait longer or must travel far from home for care, which is unacceptable.

The challenges faced by our NHS are also starkly evident in dementia care. Too many patients with dementia are caught up in the crisis of corridor care, where beds are not available and patients wait in hospital corridors for hours or even days. It is deeply distressing for patients and their families, and exacerbates the risk of deterioration. Such failures are a direct consequence of years of under-investment in our NHS, which has stretched resources to breaking point.

My own mother served in the NHS for 40 years. She witnessed at first hand both its strengths and its struggles. I know how deeply committed this Government are, just as the then Government were in the late 1990s, to rebuilding and reinvesting in our NHS. The recent commitments to increase funding and recruit more staff are steps in the right direction, but we must ensure that translates into real improvements in dementia care on the ground.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. One of my constituents has a grandma who waited a staggering 18 months for a dementia diagnosis. The family did not have the £3,000 required to get a private diagnosis. My hon. Friend mentioned the need to increase the resources available to the NHS and how committed this Government are, so will he join me in encouraging the Minister to direct resources not just to dementia care, but to dementia diagnosis, so people can get the diagnosis they need faster?

Chris Bloore: My hon. Friend's intervention highlights inequalities throughout the country and reaffirms why the hon. Member for South Devon sought this debate. People who cannot access private care are put at a huge disadvantage, which is simply not acceptable, so I agree with my hon. Friend's call to the Government.

We know that people with dementia are far more likely to have unplanned hospital admissions, which can cause distress and often worsen their condition. That shows why we urgently need better community care, and why hospital staff must have improved dementia training to provide the care that these patients deserve.

The economic cost of dementia to the UK is enormous; including healthcare, social care and the wider costs to society, it is estimated to be over £42 billion a year. The huge financial burden highlights the importance not only of investing in medical research but of improving support and care infrastructure.

Unpaid carers play a massive and often overlooked role. In fact, family members and friends provide the majority of care for people living with dementia. Women make up a disproportionate share of unpaid carers, balancing that demanding role alongside work and other responsibilities. Their contribution is invaluable but can come at a significant personal cost, including financial strain, mental and physical exhaustion, and social isolation.

Age UK has made it clear that the system is overstretched and underfunded. People in Redditch, and everywhere else, deserve consistent, high-quality care that respects their dignity no matter where they live.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In particular, I commend him for the way in which he has talked about the support that relatives often give as caregivers. Will he elaborate a little further on the points he made about the need for more resources to be focused on less advantaged communities? My own experience in representing a community that has some disadvantages is that people in those communities, particularly families from ethnic minority backgrounds, need far more support.

Chris Bloore: I completely agree. It is clear from the data that disadvantaged communities and those from ethnic minorities are not getting the targeted support that they need; I see that in my constituency, particularly in the Winyates district of Redditch. The data shows a very clear reason for further intervention.

Diagnosis is only the start. The Alzheimer's Society calls for a minimum standard of good quality post-diagnosis support, but real faults remain. Too many people receive little or no clear information after diagnosis. They are left to navigate a confusing maze of services alone, with

inconsistent follow-up and limited access to support groups or counselling. That gap leaves families isolated and unsure about managing symptoms or planning for the future, increasing stress and uncertainty during a profoundly difficult time.

Carers also bear an incredible burden. Families in Redditch tell me about exhaustion and isolation. We need better respite care, as the hon. Member for South Devon said, and better financial support and mental health services for carers. Too many of my residents rely on the voluntary sector for support in their communities; I particularly commend the Astwood Bank memory café for the work that it does.

We must improve the skills of those caring for people with dementia. The Alzheimer's Society calls for mandatory, high-quality dementia training for all adult social care workers. Hospital staff need better access to dementia training too, because too many patients experience distress and delays because staff do not have the skills that they need.

Importantly, dementia must have parity of esteem with cancers in funding and Government prioritisation. Dementia affects millions and carries a massive societal and economic cost. It deserves the same urgent intention, investment and commitment that cancers receive so that research, care and support can improve in step.

While investing in research is important, we cannot forget the urgent need to improve care for those people living with dementia. Dementia care is a test of our values. I am sure that no one in this House believes that anyone should face this journey alone or without support. We should all be committed to building a fairer, more compassionate care system that delivers for all, including the people of Redditch and the villages.

4.32 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this very important debate. There is hardly a healthcare issue so big that we do not talk enough about as dementia. Perhaps that is because it is one of the most feared diseases, for understandable reasons.

For decade upon decade—unlike cancer, for example—there has been very little tangible scientific progress, until recently. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on access to medicines and medical devices, I will focus my remarks on those treatments. Breakthroughs are coming through thick and fast, with the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency approving two disease-modifying therapies in 2024 for Alzheimer's. Those medicines chart a path to a time when Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia are a treatable condition that can be delayed to the point where it is, for all intents and purposes, cured. That is incredibly exciting for families such as mine with a history of Alzheimer's, and more is on the way.

More than 100 medicines are being investigated, so it is a matter of not if, but when new medicines come forward, yet the UK is not ready. The alarm has been raised, but no one is listening. The last Government were asleep at the wheel, and I fear that this Government are too. Moving from a system focused entirely on care to prevention and treatment will require a monumental shift in thinking that breaks down departmental silos

and redistributes budget to treatment. We know that reversing brain damage is nigh impossible, but preventing it is not. That is why early detection and diagnosis are so critical.

Dementia begins without symptoms as early as people's 40s or 50s. We need to identify those people before the onset of decline, but that requires a system with sufficient diagnostic capacity. That means improved GP waiting times, increased capacity at memory clinics and a massive increase in magnetic resonance imaging, positron emission tomography and lumbar puncture test capacity. The lack of capital investment in our NHS has left us dangerously exposed, with the lowest number of MRI scanners per capita in the OECD. The UK has 6.1 systems per million people. In Germany, the rate is 30.5. Emerging diagnostics, including the blood biomarkers being investigated at the Warneford in Oxfordshire, need to be embraced alongside getting the basics right.

The Government must also look actively at how the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence assesses new medicines in dementia. Both lecanemab and donanemab were approved by the MHRA and then rejected by NICE on the same day. That means the MHRA believes these medicines are safe and effective, but NICE believes them too expensive for the NHS, because it fails to consider the economic and social benefits, including savings to informal care.

Do we want a system where those who can pay privately for medicines that delay dementia get treatment, and those who cannot, do not? Even when a new therapy is approved by the MHRA, given the green light by NICE and by some miracle we have diagnostic capacity, patients still may not get their hands on it. Depending on how a new medicine is delivered, we may not have enough infusion capacity. If it is a pill, we will be in luck, but we cannot bank on that. The truth is that the NHS cannot cope with the innovation we all want in dementia. My message to the Government is simple: get ready.

I hope the Minister for Care will take note of one final point: please stop punting problems down to the ICBs. My recent written parliamentary question, asking what steps the Government are taking to increase the number of Alzheimer's disease specialists, was answered by him yesterday, and he said:

"The provision of dementia health care services is the responsibility of local integrated care boards".

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech, especially with that last point. Is he, like me, concerned that ICBs will have their funding cut by 50%? Dementia will be one of the many conditions that will suffer because of that.

Freddie van Mierlo: Like the hon. Member, I am incredibly frustrated that whenever I put concerns to the Minister, I get pointed towards the ICBs, and when I talk to the ICBs, they tell me to talk to the Minister. There must be responsibility within our system. The Minister has been in politics for longer than me, but I hope he will allow me to offer him a little advice. It is not the ICBs that the people of this country are angry with when it comes to not getting the treatment they deserve; it is the Government. They expect the Government to take responsibility, not pass the buck.

4.37 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My dad was a GP in Hartlepool for 33 years. When I was young, I was never more impressed than when he would talk to me about his medical knowledge. The depth of his knowledge was extraordinary, and one of the tricks he used to be able to do at any given moment was take any two numbers I gave him and divide them or multiply them and get the answer right when I checked on the calculator. It was a rare skill, and his impact over those 33 years meant that when I went into politics the most common thing I heard on the doorstep was, "Are you the doctor's son?" He did tell me recently that someone had asked him whether he was the MP's dad, and I take that as a small victory.

In Hartlepool, there are 1,299 people living with dementia, and my dad is one of them. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's five years after he retired. Speaking to my mum, who obviously is his carer, too, we both agree that it feels like we have already gone through a form of bereavement, because the person who brought me up is not quite there any more. He is happy, and he enjoys his grandchildren, but it is different. I want to see that changed for other people, because early diagnosis is critical. My dad did not get the early diagnosis that he should have received, and we have paid the consequences as we have gone forward.

In Hartlepool, we are pioneering a new dementia strategy. I am so proud of Hartlepool borough council, because as part of that strategy, the council has committed to ensuring that 100% of its social care staff have dementia training, so that this evil disease—I do mean evil—can be caught and better treated at an earlier stage. As we have already heard from the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), only 29% of social care staff in this country have any form of dementia training. I impress on the Minister that that must change.

Dementia is the defining health and social care challenge of our time. It impacts one in two of us—50% of the population—either through being diagnosed ourselves, or having someone in our life diagnosed with it. Despite this reality, too many people living with dementia and their families struggle to access necessary support. The lack of an integrated care pathway often leads to families being led into fragmented and complex systems, where they can easily fall through the cracks and reach crisis point. Shockingly, one in four hospital beds is occupied by a person living with dementia, and those people face hospital readmissions at rates 50% higher than the general population. We must improve specialist dementia support, both in hospitals and in our communities. That is not just a moral imperative; it is vital for building the health service that we want, one that is fit for the future. The forthcoming 10-year health plan presents a crucial opportunity to rectify those shortcomings.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I have worked in this area of policy and services, and I am aware that some of the most powerful advocates for change in dementia care are people with dementia themselves and their families. Does he agree that, when formulating new strategies for dementia care, people with dementia must be fully included in making those plans, based on their own experience?

Mr Brash: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. In a completely unplanned way, the next sentence in my speech is, "It is essential that the voices of those affected by dementia are at the forefront of these NHS reforms", so his intervention was very timely and deadly accurate.

We must ensure that the clinical support and person-centred care that reduces the risk of crises and unnecessary hospital admissions comes to the fore. To that end, I urge Government Ministers to commit to providing ringfenced funding for a dementia specialist nurse in each NHS acute trust, and to integrate specialist nurses such as Admiral nurses—I was so proud to meet them here in Parliament recently—into multidisciplinary neighbourhood health centres. With 1 million people currently living with dementia, and with that number projected to rise to 1.6 million by 2040, as we have heard today, we literally cannot afford delay. The economic impact of dementia is estimated to reach £90 billion by 2040, with 40% of care costs borne by families and unpaid carers. It is time for action.

One of the consequences of my father's Alzheimer's diagnosis is that that evil disease has done to him what it does to so many: it robs people of their strengths, but it exacerbates their weaknesses too. My father now struggles with travel, and despite my election in July last year, it is very unlikely that he will ever get here to see me stand in Parliament. In his name—Dr Charles Brash—I ask the Minister to act.

4.43 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash), who has hit the nail on the head when it comes to how terrible this disease is.

Forty years ago this August, my paternal grandfather was dying of lung cancer. My father went to the hospital with him. The day went on and on, and eventually, my grandfather said to my father, "Go and give your mother a call—let her know where we are at." She answered the phone, and my dad said, "Just to let you know, mum, we're delayed at the hospital. Dad and I are going to be late." She said, "Oh, I've not seen your father in three weeks." At that point, he said, his blood ran cold. Tragically, my grandfather died just two weeks later. The funeral came, and the funeral went. My grandmother constantly asked, "Where have all these flowers come from?"

Within four years, my grandmother had to go into a nursing home. Making the right decisions during those four years put a huge strain on my father. "Do we sell the house? How are we going to pay for the care?" My grandmother was walking the streets at 3 am. She was leaving the gas on. Neighbours were saying, "The whole street is going to be destroyed. Derek, you have got to do something." Then she was put into the home. What I have found during my work on dementia is that that is often the pattern. The spouse, or the partner, protects his or her spouse or partner. They pick up the slack—and this is such a ratcheting disease, which comes so slowly, that they do not realise that they are under more and more pressure and taking on more and more work.

Tragically again, in 2019, my father-in-law died suddenly, and it soon became apparent that he had been hiding my mother-in-law's dementia. My mother-in-law is doing very well: she has a carer, and on some days she is still pretty sparky. She was a formidable woman in her time.

She is 87 years old now. She still remembers me, and there is an important point there: I will be the person she forgets next, because I was the last in. I say to my wife, "For as long as she remembers me, we are still in a roughly good place." That is quite a sad statement, is it not? It is sad that we are moving down that road.

However, I was inspired by something I saw shortly after I was elected, in 2010 or 2011, at a dementia café down in Rothwell. I went there when it first opened, and I quickly became aware of the support that it was giving people, and of how much they appreciated it. That brings me back to what the hon. Member for Hartlepool said about how cruel this disease is. Because people are gradually supporting their loved ones more and more, they reach a point at which there is enormous pressure. They are not going to take a step back, go on to Google or try to get on to the local Facebook to try and work out what is going on locally. People do not know what is going on out there, and that was even more true 10 or so years ago.

A huge number of voluntary organisations take clients. Let me name just two in my constituency: Wetherby in Support of the Elderly—WISE—and the Easingwold Hub Club. They provide a huge amount of support for people with dementia, but dozens of other voluntary organisations supply an incredible service that helps to take the pressure off carers, who are also able to take their loved ones out, which in itself can be stimulating. That gave me an idea, and I created the Dementia Directory and one of the first dementia-friendly constituencies. The directory breaks up the constituency up into parts, and lists all the events that are going on. We are working on the new one now. It is a complex process; it is a bit of a spider's web, because we find one event and then another is off, and then another is off. We try not to miss any, but inevitably we do.

It is because the last directory had such a huge and positive impact that we are preparing this one for the new constituency, following the boundary change. All that we need now is the sponsorship that will enable it to be printed and posted. It will make a difference, because, as the hon. Member for Hartlepool said, this is a terribly cruel disease. There is a statement that upsets and annoys me greatly: "It is not such a bad disease, because the person who has it does not know they have it." That is an awful thing to say. I can never hold back a tear when I see the advertisement in which a chap sitting on the end of the bed says to his wife, "I want to go home." How many of us, as children, became homesick? I was homesick when I went to university. It is a terrifying thought that as you get older you will not know your partner, and you will be constantly homesick.

For Members who may not know this, I have a tip, because I have done dementia training. When I went to a care home, there was an elderly lady of about 90, who said, "I don't like it here. They never let me see my parents. I just wish they'd let me see my father." I had been told to get into a memory of the person and mention somewhere their relative may be, so I said, "Well, your father's down at the allotment." She said, "Oh, yes, that's right," and she calmed down. Do not argue with those people, because that will just make them more upset, but try to take them back to a memory.

As well the directory being used to notice events, it highlights things that may help, such as hydration. One of the things that happens with elderly people is that

they do not want to keep going to the toilet and they get worried about doing so, so they are often quite sparky in the morning when they have had a cup of tea, but by 3 o'clock they are getting memory lapses because they have not drunk enough. That is also something we have to tell people.

How many Members in this Chamber, when they said they were going to speak in this debate—they do not have to put their hands up—had somebody say, "Oh, don't forget to go there"? Everybody seems to know what dementia is, but nobody really knows what it is. It is a real paradox. Everybody makes that comment, "Don't forget," but do they really understand the depth and impact of this disease? Dementia includes Alzheimer's disease. I recently read a book about Ronald Reagan, which at the end said that he did not open his eyes for the last four years of his life. Just think about that, and what this terrible disease does to people and all the impact it has.

This debate is about dementia care, and several contributions have been made about things the Government can do. I raised this issue back in 2012-13, and the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, did put funding into research for dementia. The trouble is that we have learned how to preserve all the organs of our body with medical research and medical advances, but we have never bothered with the brain. The blunt truth is that, before this disease had the prevalence it now has, most people were dead before they got it. However, there is something we can do all do as Members of Parliament in our constituencies, and that is to draw together all the voluntary organisations that give such relief to families and help to stimulate the sufferer along the way.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a characteristically powerful and informed speech. He mentioned the importance of the role of volunteers, which I think the whole House will recognise. Does he, however, share my concern that, with an ageing population, we seem to be seeing a smaller cohort of people prepared to step up to volunteer? Across the Government and across this place, a noble endeavour to embark upon would be to champion and encourage more people to get involved with volunteering outside the usual catchment or cohort, because otherwise, in the not-too-distant future, these vital organisations will be so short of volunteers that they will not be able to do the jobs they need to do.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend, who does indeed make an important comment. My constituency of Wetherby and Easingwold has an older demographic, and that will become more acute over time. He is right to say that there is a dedicated band of volunteers, but most of the people who do the voluntary work during daytime are of an age to be retired. There are people who I think do an incredible job in supporting people—they really do—and they deserve nothing but our gratitude and thanks.

As I have said, there is something positive that we really can do as Members of Parliament, so I urge everyone when they are back in their constituencies to look at what goes on and see what they can do to promote it. I promise them that it will make a transformational difference not just to the lives of the people affected, but to their lives as Members of Parliament in doing what they can do for their local community, which is why we are all here in the first place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Over 20 Members wish to speak, so there will be a speaking limit of six minutes.

4.53 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this most important of debates. Dementia care is a subject incredibly close to my heart and that of many of my Amber Valley constituents who write to me. Any hon. Members who were present when I made my maiden speech may recall my speaking about my dad, David Farnsworth. Once an extremely talkative man, sadly, like that of so many others, dementia has taken his voice.

With that in mind, it is incumbent on me and other hon. Members to use our voices in this place to advocate for much-needed improvements to dementia care. That must start with increased diagnosis. Alzheimer's UK is rightly calling on the Government to improve dementia diagnosis rates and set ambitious targets for the future. NHS statistics show that diagnosis rates, as of July 2024, were 65%, so a third of people living with dementia across the UK still do not have a diagnosis, meaning they are missing out on the vital care support and symptomatic treatment it can bring.

The picture is particularly bad for the 70,800 people in the UK who are estimated to have young-onset dementia, where symptoms develop before the age of 65. Getting a diagnosis can take twice as long as for older people. My father-in-law, Michael Spare, was diagnosed with dementia at the age of 64. My mother-in-law, Yvonne, recalls how hard it was to get a diagnosis and to be taken seriously, despite them both knowing that there was a problem. Dementia UK advocates for the Government to mandate every integrated care system to develop a young-onset dementia pathway to include providing timely and accurate diagnosis. I wholeheartedly support that.

When my dad was diagnosed with dementia in 2018, my family and I were frightened. At the time I had a colleague, Sue, who had gone through this with her mother. She was kind enough to give me some advice: try not to focus on what you have lost; celebrate what you can still share and enjoy together. I remembered that advice recently when my step-mum, Kate, started the engine of my dad's beloved classic car. His face lit up at the sound. Somewhere deep inside, he remembers the joy that restoring his Triumph Spitfire brought him over many years.

Not everyone will have someone like Sue to talk to and living with dementia can be very lonely. For those people, Admiral nurses, employed by Dementia UK, can be a godsend. They provide an invaluable service to families confronting or navigating the reality of living with dementia. I recently had the pleasure of meeting Kath Hunt, who works at the Ripley branch of Nationwide building society. Nationwide has been partnering Dementia UK to offer free appointments with Admiral nurses in high street branches across the country, including in Ripley. Sadly, there are far too few Admiral nurses and, while I am thankful that the scheme exists, it should not fall to partnerships like this for families to get support. Dementia UK recommends that Admiral or specialist

nurses should be core members of multidisciplinary neighbourhood health centres to provide vital care in the community. I wholeheartedly support that recommendation.

Admiral and specialist dementia nurses can also be hospital-based, but they are few and far between. When my dad was hospitalised for an infection unrelated to his dementia, he was put on a general ward. He was so ill, we thought he would never get out of bed. Several weeks into his hospitalisation, I saw a nurse perform what seemed a miracle. He was able to get my dad to engage and even got him to stand up. Amazed, I asked how this could be. He explained that he usually worked on the dementia ward. It was his expert skills and knowledge rather than a miracle that made the difference, but the nurse was certainly an angel in my eyes. Dementia UK is demanding that the Government commit ringfenced funding for a dementia specialist nurse service within each NHS acute trust, and Age UK is calling for urgent improvements to staff training in hospitals to ensure people with dementia have their needs fully met. I support both measures.

My dad is now at home and is looked after by my step-mum Kate and my brother Bradd Farnsworth, supported by visiting carers. I recently asked whether they had had specialist training for caring for people with dementia. They had not, but said they would find it useful. They are not alone. Despite people living with dementia making up 70% of residents of older age residential care and 60% of people drawing on care at home, around 29% of social care staff have no record of dementia training. I am calling for mandatory training for social care staff, in line with the dementia training standards framework, which is absolutely essential, and I will continue to campaign for that.

With the 10-year health plan for England due, this is a key moment. It is vital that improving dementia care is included in the NHS reforms, and I implore the Government not to pass up the opportunity to fix dementia care at long last.

4.59 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for bringing this important debate to this Chamber.

Dementia is one of the most urgent public health crises we face, and one that profoundly affects so many of my constituents; according to Alzheimer's Research UK, 1,800 people are living with dementia in our area. The current package of care for those living with dementia is simply not good enough. Far too many of my constituents speak of delayed diagnoses, exhausted kinship carers and gaps in social care provision.

Last year, I joined the brilliant Warwickshire Reminiscence Action Project in Stratford-upon-Avon to hear directly from people in my community living with dementia and their carers. Their stories were heartbreaking and moving, much like those we have heard in the Chamber today. There are many dementia cafés and social groups around my constituency, which provide information, much-needed support, and memory and sensory activities. We must support care workers, including by equipping them with specialist training, and kinship carers, who give everything, often with little recognition or support. Improving the availability of respite care is one step forward.

I have to say that I was deeply disappointed that the Government have dropped their target of diagnosing two thirds of those living with dementia. Early and timely diagnosis is absolutely crucial for individuals and their families. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon said, we need a proper workforce plan for social care, and to ensure that every person living with dementia receives timely, high-quality care, while making sure their carers are properly supported, too. That can be achieved only with early diagnosis.

We also know that dementia is an intersectional issue, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately affected. Falling diagnosis targets and longer delays for appropriate care will fall hardest on those who cannot afford to go private. Dementia is also a rural issue; in communities such as mine, the risk of isolation for dementia patients is even greater, as is the need for strong local support. Families impacted by dementia often have to wait far too long to get the best support.

Make no mistake: this is not just about compassion. Dementia already costs the UK economy £42 billion a year, a figure that is projected to more than double by 2040 if we do not act.

In conclusion, I ask that we do not row back on care commitments, and that we have a dementia care plan that eases pressure on our acute settings while giving patients and their families the support they need when they need it.

5.3 pm

Dr Becky Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for bringing this important debate to the House this afternoon. I also thank other Members for sharing such personal testimonies; as well as bringing broader context, it really adds value to what this House brings to our national conversation.

As a public health consultant, it would be remiss of me not to spend a couple of minutes talking about how to reduce the risk of dementia before getting on to dementia care, as only about a third of UK adults think it is actually possible to reduce their risk of dementia. I am sure these recommendations will all be familiar to everybody listening. As healthcare professionals and as politicians, we should encourage people of all ages and stages of life, and in particular middle-aged adults, to be more physically active, eat healthily and maintain a healthy weight, drink less alcohol, stop smoking—very apt at the moment—and be socially active.

Many Members have spoken today about being socially active, and socially isolated older adults are nearly twice as likely to develop dementia within 15 years. Further recommendations include controlling diabetes and high blood pressure. If that sounds familiar, it is because we talk about that in the cardiovascular realm, too. We should be communicating loudly that what is good for the heart is good for reducing the risk of dementia.

Let me move on to dementia care. I want to talk a little bit about what we are doing in Worthing West, which relates to a lot of what has been said already, and then I shall conclude with the national picture. In Worthing West we have 2,361 people currently living with the condition. The charity Guild Care is a not-for-profit care service for older people, people with dementia, and

children and adults with learning difficulties. It provides care for 120 people with dementia in their own homes and for a further 100 in its respite service. It is great that we have heard so much about respite services in this debate today. It is so important to help people with dementia access support, care and activities that provide a healthy way of living. People visiting dementia day services experience stronger social ties, have better mental health, require fewer GP visits, use less medication, sleep better—something that we all need to do—and have more active engaged minds.

We also know that respite is vital because behind each diagnosis, as we have heard today, often stands an unpaid carer whose career and life are put on hold while their own health quietly deteriorates, as stress, sleep loss and isolation take their toll. Inevitably, in that situation, we see dementia rates rising. Recognising and investing in the value of respite has huge benefits.

We have also heard about some innovative community care hubs across the country. Guild Care in Worthing West is developing its own community hub to combat social isolation. It provides integrated dementia care, diagnosis, support and a rich programme of activities that keep people healthy and living at home. That is an aspiration that we want for all of us—to live well and to stay at home for as long as possible. Our role in Government is to ensure a more co-ordinated system, building on best practice models, such as those that we have heard about today, including that of Guild Care in Worthing West.

We have also touched on training. Guild Care delivers in-house specialist dementia training to its staff in a bespoke programme that it developed with colleagues in the Bromley dementia hub—so I give a shout-out for Bromley there. Good research-based staff training is essential to help care professionals to deliver compassionate, person-centred support, as so many hon. Members have said today. It is the bedrock of quality care.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned person-centred care in dementia. Does she agree that initiatives such as Playlist for Life in my constituency, which uses meaningful music to reconnect people with dementia to their memories and their identity, should be more widely supported across the NHS?

Dr Cooper: What an outstanding service that sounds. I know there is a creative mental health all-party parliamentary group taking place today. We underestimate the benefits of exposure to the creative arts for all of us, specifically for those with dementia. My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I thank him for raising that. Clearly, training is essential, as are the creative arts.

To conclude, I wish to talk about what this all means nationally, and specifically about the implementation of a national social care service, which I know the Minister is very well aware of. I acknowledge that the Casey Commission is a vital step towards implementing that service. The Darzi report and our recent work in the Health and Social Care Committee, some members of whom are here this afternoon, underline what we all know, which is that we cannot fix the NHS without fixing the broken social care system. The two are fundamentally interconnected; we must not look at health and social care issues in isolation, and that includes dementia. We must ensure that strategic plans build better integration

[Dr Beccy Cooper]

and recognise that investment in social care is essential. It is essential to improve people's lives. Moving from treatment to prevention of illness is pivotal to the NHS 10-year strategy and to reducing the spiralling costs to the NHS of an ageing population.

Let me conclude now with this idea of changing the narrative. This has been touched on this afternoon. Sometimes we think about dementia as an illness that has no hope. One Member has already said that 50% of us may well develop dementia in our lifetimes. One way or another, the illness has touched pretty much everyone in this Chamber. Care Talk recently published a comprehensive report on dementia, which is well worth reading. I would like to urge everyone to take up this new narrative on dementia. The traditional narrative surrounding dementia focuses on decline and inevitability, but, as I have already mentioned, around 40% of dementia cases might be attributable to risk factors that can be modified. A 20% reduction in the risk factors per decade could reduce UK prevalence by 16%—even by this year.

I am advocating for policies that help people live well and protect them from illnesses including dementia, and for services that help people to live well with dementia, by emphasising their strengths, which many personal testimonies have already touched on. We must also be supporting people and their families to better navigate the condition and contribute to their communities and our society.

5.9 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Dementia is heartbreaking. With over 944,000 people in the UK suffering from this illness, we need to support families and sufferers in a more holistic manner. Health in Wales is devolved—as it is in Scotland—to the Senedd. However, as dementia affects so many of my constituents, I want to highlight the work that is being done in my constituency to support carers and their loved ones during this difficult period in their lives.

The trajectory for dementia is upwards, with 1.6 million adults expected to suffer from the illness by 2050. Some 70,000 of those will be under the age of 65, so although it is known as an older person's disease, it is not exclusively so. Lewy body dementia, which affected a very close friend of mine, is thought to account for 15% to 20% of cases of dementia, and it can be difficult to diagnose because the symptoms are so similar to Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease. The symptoms for Lewy body dementia can include hallucinations, loss of sleep, movement problems, changes in alertness and attention, and most of all confusion.

I think of how afraid they must feel when they know that something is wrong but they cannot articulate their feelings and do not know what to do or where to go for help, and the same can be said for their carers, families and loved ones. Their world is turned upside down. First they have to navigate a diagnosis, and then they have to obtain the help that is there, but how do they find that help? Where is it and who is there to point them in the right direction?

In Caerfyrddin we have dementia groups and memory clinics, all run by volunteers who have walked this journey with their loved ones—people who understand and care. The Cathen Dementia Group is one such safe space.

It runs every Thursday from Llangathen Hall between 2 pm and 4 pm and serves the wider Llandeilo area and all rural villages around it. When I popped in for a visit in January, they said that they wanted a way to reach more people who are living with dementia, such as people who live rurally and do not drive cars and people who do not have the support network that others have on their doorstep.

Working with Dolen Teifi, a third sector volunteer transport provider, we are preparing to have transport in place for the autumn term. Working with the Carmarthenshire Association of Voluntary Services, we will secure funding for not only this but other incidentals that they need in order to operate. Working collaboratively, we can achieve the help that these groups need. The groups provide safe spaces for sufferers of dementia, support for the carers, and the chance to have a cuppa and a chat. The groups provide a bit of normality for a couple of hours a week.

If anybody can help and support these groups, please do. They are a lifeline within my rural constituency, where if people do not drive then they just do not go anywhere or meet anyone. I want to thank Dolen Teifi and the Carmarthenshire Association of Voluntary Services, but I want to give my biggest thanks to the team of volunteers and carers who run groups such as Cathen Dementia Group.

5.13 pm

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): It is a huge honour and privilege to follow the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) and the many others who have shared personal family stories as well as stories about what is happening in their constituency. I truly welcome this debate and thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing it.

Dementia care is important to many of us in this House and to the communities we represent. I would like to start by putting on record my thanks to local dementia support teams and the families and volunteers involved for their work in my constituency. It seems fitting that we are discussing this matter during Volunteers' Week, having heard many important contributions, particularly the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), about how we can all play a personal role and encourage more volunteers in this space.

I want to put on record a particular shout-out to a volunteer in my constituency, Heather Hooper, a dementia friend ambassador who has done so much to help me in my journey of learning on this issue. Indeed, I thank all the volunteers in this space for their help and outreach work, including for helping me as a new constituency Member of Parliament, along with my team, to learn and understand not just what needs to change in the care system, but how we can support families and people with dementia when dealing with the casework requests that sadly come forward so often because of challenges in this area.

As many in this House will know, dementia is the leading cause of death in the UK, and one in two of us will be affected by this complex condition in our lifetime. The individual stories I have heard from local families and carers are so moving—perhaps some of the most moving casework I have received since being elected—and it is heartbreaking to hear about the lack of accessible

care and support still faced by too many people. The facts and figures, beyond the human toll of the stories that we have heard, are stark. Dementia UK's recent survey results are a hard read. Three quarters of respondents said that they did not receive the right care to meet their needs through the NHS, and 76% said that hospital care did not meet the specific needs of people with dementia. We cannot, and should not, accept that.

I am hopeful that in Peterborough we can make a positive change. In my constituency, there has been a recent debate about the future of our Dementia Resource Centre—a unique partnership between families, care workers and the city council, and one of just two in the country that follow such a model. The centre is, in effect, a one-stop centre for dementia sufferers and their families in the city. It offers vital services in the community that enable people to be diagnosed with dementia fast. It works in collaboration with GPs and the local authority, as well as with other bits of the health service—we have heard about how important that is—to give people with dementia and their loved ones the care and support they need. It also works to simplify the system so that it is based around their needs, rather than there being an expectation on too many people to navigate an already complex system, given the pressure that they may be experiencing. I thank the Alzheimer's Society for its dedication and work alongside the council and other healthcare professionals.

With dementia rates only set to increase, centres of excellence like the one in Peterborough need to be promoted across the country, and we have heard about so many good examples already. That is why we have fought so hard to keep the centre open in our city. The story of our dementia centre in Peterborough will be familiar, with so many of its services involving local government. The accumulation of financial pressures on the council means that the authority is rationalising the estate. We have recently been through the traumatic experience of finding out whether the Dementia Resource Centre would continue to exist and where it would be moved to, but I am pleased to say that it is now safe.

Thanks to campaigners, families and the incredible work of Councillor Dr Shabina Qayyum—our council's cabinet member for adult social care, who other hon. Friends will know—we have saved the centre and found a new home for it at Paston Farm community centre. That means not only that we have saved the centre; we have also created a bespoke area in which the council will continue to invest. It will provide a dedicated space for socialising, so that families and carers have something that is in their lives every day, alongside the professional medical care and healthcare that they need.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is giving an incredibly powerful and trademark passionate speech. When he talks about the support that families need, will he also recognise the support that young people and particularly young carers need? To experience a loved one suffering from dementia must be incredibly challenging for younger people as well.

Andrew Pakes: My hon. Friend has answered his own question, given the passion with which he has told that story; the role of young carers is a story to which the House must bear witness. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Care is passionate about ensuring that

those who care for loved ones facing health conditions get the recognition and support they need, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for his question as well as the Minister, in recognition of the role he plays in this issue.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman's story of his saving his local centre rings a bell with me. The Hunter Centre in Haslemere, which had been run by the Alzheimer's Society, looked like it was going to close in 2017, but because of some great work by Anne Downing, it was saved and is now thriving—in fact, I am a patron—so I am sure that this can be done not just in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and in mine, but across the country.

Andrew Pakes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving us such a wonderful practical example. I would correct him only by saying that it was not me that saved our centre; it was the campaigners and their families. I would like to ensure that the record represents that it was their work that saved it, rather than me as an individual MP, although I was glad to play my small role alongside their great efforts to hold me to account.

Fundamentally, care belongs in the community. It is our duty to promote and support such initiatives as I have talked about, and to ensure that the wonderful creation that is the NHS is centred on community-based care, not on top-down-based care. It is our duty to promote this and I sincerely hope that this type of provision, alongside the additional services that hon. Members have spoken so passionately about today, will be the hallmark of what comes next and will feature prominently in the 10-year plan and in the remarks that the Minister will shortly make.

5.20 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Dementia is a uniquely tragic disease because it is, after all, an attack on the mind and on one's memories. It is a terminal malady for which there is currently no cure and which affects almost every family in the country. My constituent, Timothy, said this of his family's experience with the disease:

"My wife, to whom I was married for 65 years, slipped into dementia about three years ago. When dementia strikes, it comes slowly. We did not know what was happening, and though our children were very supportive, they could not know why one parent had dementia and the other didn't. Household management got worse, making each day a strain. My wife had been a superb cook, but I was a poor substitute. Our children tried to help, but they had their own lives to live."

In my constituency of Tiverton and Minehead, it is estimated we have 1,877 people living with dementia—a figure that far exceeds the national average—and yet in my constituency and in rural areas around the country, the paucity of care provision coupled with significant transport challenges means that the impact of dementia is felt even more acutely. The lack of access to dementia care only exacerbates feelings of abandonment and isolation.

It is no secret that we are an ageing society. Projections from the national health service indicate that we are on course to have over 1 million people living with dementia by 2030, and as many as 1.6 million by the mid-point of this century. This significant demographic shift underscores

[Rachel Gilmour]

the need to expand and strengthen the workforce in the care sector through upskilling, training and retention strategies. I speak with particular thrust as the Member of Parliament for an overwhelmingly rural area. I am all too aware of the recruitment and retention woes in remote communities where geographical isolation and resource constraints make things additionally challenging.

Several Members of my party have made the point about social care and I know that my party leader makes it on a weekly basis at Prime Minister's questions, so I will not revisit the need for social care as it runs alongside the NHS. However, we must support our carers. Increased pay for carers is not merely a matter of fairness; it is an investment in a future where better care will inevitably lead to better outcomes for those with dementia. After all, a rising tide lifts all boats. According to the UK Dementia Research Institute, 85% of people with dementia wish to remain in their own home, so it is about time that unpaid carers—those silent heroes—were afforded the right to carer's leave and a statutory guarantee of regular respite breaks.

Unlike other speakers, I have not talked about my family's experience with dementia until the end of my speech because, quite frankly, I thought I would cry. My three brothers and I were lucky enough to be brought up by an intellectual colossus: my mother, M—Cambridge educated, a City solicitor, and a wonderful mother and grandmother. Fortunately, my family is able financially to look after her, and I am endlessly grateful to my brother and sister-in-law for looking after her as well as they do, and to her carer, Nicolette, who comes from Romania and who has literally changed her life.

Somebody earlier said that it is important not to look at the sad side of things, but to look at the best side. I rang my mother—mummy—last Sunday. We were laughing so much that I nearly had to put the phone down. She might not be able to remember everything, but she still has a sense of humour, she still has a good appetite, and she always enjoys a wee glass of sherry. She will be here with me next Wednesday for parliamentary questions. Mummy, I can't wait to see you. I love you.

5.25 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. As Members across the House have rightly highlighted, dementia remains one of the most urgent health and social care challenges facing our country. One in two of us will be affected by it in our lifetime, whether through our own diagnosis, caring for a loved one or both.

Over 14,200 people in the Black Country live with dementia, including over 3,000 in city of Wolverhampton. That number is expected to more than double over the next 10 years. As lack of early diagnosis is an issue and prevents proper dementia care, and considering the prevalence of dementia in our communities, I am pleased that 67% of people with dementia in Wolverhampton have been formally diagnosed as having the condition, compared to 62% nationally and 59% across the west midlands. These are more than just statistics; each number represents the individuals, families and communities living with the daily realities of this cruel condition.

The total annual cost of dementia in England reached £42 billion in 2024, and that is set to double in the next 15 years. More than half the cost is shouldered by unpaid carers—the family members and friends who often go without support, recognition or respite. I welcome the Government's recent increase in the carer's allowance earnings threshold, which will enable more carers to remain in work while continuing to receive the support they rely on. That is certainly a step in the right direction, but if we are serious about improving dementia care, we must start with the chronic underfunding of our social care system, which is fragmented, overstretched and under-resourced. We cannot rely on good will alone, so I urge the Government to commit to sustainable, long-term funding for our social care sector—for the workers, for community-based services and for specialist dementia provision.

I am proud that the city of Wolverhampton, which is within my constituency of Wolverhampton West, has been recognised as a dementia-friendly community by the Alzheimer's Society, with over 13,000 dementia friends across the city. I particularly commend the work of Alz Café in my constituency, which is an independent, volunteer-led service providing a warm, welcoming space for people living with dementia and their families. With live music, hot meals and compassionate support, it is a lifeline for many, and it is run entirely free of charge.

Community-led initiatives are vital, but we cannot allow them to become a substitute for a robust national care infrastructure in our NHS and our country. Volunteers and charities play an incredible role, but they cannot carry the burden alone. Dementia care should therefore be included in the NHS 10-year health plan, as advocated by Dementia UK, with more specialist dementia nurses in our hospitals and in the community to deliver timely, person-centred care, which can save on costs by reducing hospital stays. It is beyond time for us to have a properly funded, co-ordinated national approach to social care that ensures that everyone affected by dementia can access the crucial care and support that they so need.

It is important that we have timely diagnosis of dementia, particularly given that young-onset dementia is becoming common, and age-appropriate support. Dementia care is vital for the future health of us all.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): My constituent Silé's husband developed early onset dementia at the age of 38. Nobody knew what it was initially, because they were not expecting a normal, healthy 38-year-old to have early-onset dementia. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to do much more right across the UK to highlight that dementia and Alzheimer's can develop at any age?

Warinder Juss: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: we need to take urgent action, and earlier. There are now cases of people having got dementia even as early as the age of 50 without knowing that they have the condition because there is no diagnosis, so I agree with the hon. Lady.

5.30 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Everyone deserves high-quality care when they need it—that is particularly the case for those with dementia, who often have some of the most complex needs—but the sad reality

is that social care services in this country are in crisis. The disease has a huge impact not only on the patients, but on their family and friends as they struggle to care for them.

Richard wrote to me about his experience of being a full-time carer for his wife of 55 years. She has ataxia, compounded by dementia. She is losing her ability to walk or talk, write or use the phone, or follow simple instructions, and Richard has to be with her 24/7 to ensure her safety. The daily routine starts with getting his wife out of bed; transporting her to the bathroom; helping her with the toilet; getting her into the shower and then getting in the shower to shower her; helping her clean her teeth; getting her back to the bedroom to dry her hair and dress her; taking her downstairs via their self-funded stairlift; getting her into a wheelchair to transport her to the dining table for breakfast; and then taking her back to the lounge. She may sleep for a little bit, but sooner or later there will be a call for help to go to the toilet, so it is back into the wheelchair, back on the stairlift and back on the toilet. Richard will clean and dress her, and then she will go back on the stairlift, back into the wheelchair and back into the lounge, where the whole palaver will repeat after five minutes, as she has forgotten that she has already been to the toilet and cannot be convinced otherwise.

That is just one small part of a day, and it sounds relentless. Owing to a recent back injury, Richard has had to employ a carer for two mornings a week to help. He wants to care for his wife as long as he can, but one day he may have to move her to a nursing home, and that worries him. He reckons it will cost approximately £1,800 per week and rising due to the increase in national insurance, and he is now worried that in pandering to populism on immigration, the Government may make it even harder to recruit carers. He says:

“Once again, it is the least fortunate and needy of us who will bear the cost.”

Another constituent wrote:

“When my wife was first diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 2019, we were given a couple of booklets and told to prepare for the inevitable.”

He went on to explain that for a couple of years, including during the covid lockdown, they saw no one apart from the occasional surgery visit, until a crisis in 2023 led to the community mental health team being involved. For a while, his wife got a fair amount of support, but when the mental health team deemed her stabilised, that support was withdrawn, leading to another crisis in January 2024. He is very worried that the whole cycle will play out again and again.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My hon. Friend reminds me of a conversation that I had with William, a constituent from High Ham who has been caring for his wife, who has had Alzheimer’s for many years. He has relied on the intensive dementia support team in Yeovil, but the service has recently been reorganised. As a result, it has become quite fragmented across Somerset and there is no central contact or clear structure. There are incomplete records, leaving some carers adrift. Does my hon. Friend agree that streamlining dementia care services is vital to ensure clarity and co-ordination for carers?

Claire Young: Absolutely. It is a very frightening situation for people to find themselves in. For carers who have to do all that I have described Richard having to do, having to battle their way to find the services available just adds to the problems.

My constituent says that mental health services are the Cinderella of the NHS. There is a lack of staff and resources, and such services need more financial support so that they do not abandon people the minute they think they can get away with it.

A number of Members have highlighted the importance of voluntary initiatives, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those in my constituency, including Time 4 Carers, the memory cafés in Yate and Thornbury, and the Charfield memory group. However, voluntary initiatives are not enough to provide the support that dementia patients and their carers need.

The cross-party commission on social care is welcome, but unpaid carers such as my constituents cannot wait three years—they need a fair deal now. That means respite breaks, so that they do not get to breaking point and can carry on caring for their loved ones, as they want to. It means ongoing support from health services, regular check-ins and not being abandoned when the immediate crisis is over, and it means having the confidence that when they do need to turn to paid carers, those carers will be available, they will have dementia training, and cost will not be a barrier to using them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am now asking Members to speak for no longer than five minutes.

5.35 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for bringing this really important debate to the House. I am speaking today on behalf of the 1,422 people in Leigh and Atherton living with dementia. That is above the national average; my constituency ranks 281 out of 650. I want to speak about the incredible work being done in our communities to support these individuals.

Sadly, due to years of neglect and underfunding, there is no integrated dementia care pathway, and trying to navigate fragmented and complex health and social care systems can cause families to fall between the gaps and reach crisis point. Dementia is placing a monumental pressure on our health and social care system, but it is all too often an afterthought. This cruel condition is having a terrible impact on so many families, and that is clear when speaking to my constituents, who share with me heartbreaking stories of their struggle to access the support they need. That is why improving dementia care in the community is essential. It can offer improved outcomes not only for those with dementia but in the wider health and social care system, as we have heard today.

At a local level, we are fortunate to have brilliant organisations that go above and beyond, offering care, comfort and invaluable support. I pay tribute to my remarkable constituent, Mark Aldred, whose passion for dementia causes is nothing short of inspiring. When he was mayor, his charity appeal partnered with the

[Jo Platt]

local Alzheimer's Society and raised an outstanding £30,000—a true testament to his unwavering commitment to making a real difference. Together with his wife Karen, Mark founded the Good Deeds Trust, a heartfelt initiative born from their deep connection with the people of our borough. Their family-run charity offers essential advice and support to those navigating the challenges of dementia.

We are also privileged to have specialist dementia nurses Bridget Lawler and Caroline Clifton at Belong, a care home based in the heart of Atherton. I pay tribute to them. Their dedication to supporting patients has earned them national recognition, as they have been shortlisted for the Admiral nurse award at the Dementia Care awards. They offer invaluable advice, help arrange assessments with healthcare professionals and provide essential guidance on securing financial support.

I could not be prouder of the staff at Belong Atherton. To see their hard work and kindness recognised at national level is truly inspirational, but they are not alone. We have a pub in Tyldesley called the Union Arms that has been holding dementia meet-ups for the last 10 years. It has become a safe space for people living with the condition to spend time in good company. The group, known as the Forgotten Regulars, has created a fantastic support network, brightening the lives of those affected by dementia, including their families. Despite the incredible work the pub is doing, it faces the challenge of rising costs as it tries to keep the dementia club running.

As a dementia research champion, I proudly stand with Dementia UK and other organisations advocating for better support for community initiatives, greater investment in research and treatment and earlier diagnosis to transform the future of dementia in my constituency and the rest of the UK. Ultimately, ensuring we have a health service fit for the future means improving community and primary dementia support. That starts with championing and nurturing the incredible work being done in our communities that is making a difference and supporting those who need it most.

5.39 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. Dementia care is in crisis. One in six hospital beds is currently occupied by someone with dementia, and by 2040 it is estimated that the figure will be one in four hospital beds. We need the Government to take bold, radical action to introduce a system that provides the best possible support for people with dementia and their families—support that is easily accessible every step of the way.

I have heard from many carers in my constituency who are stretched to their limit, and adding to that pressure is the constant uncertainty over support. People with dementia often fall through the gaps in the health and social care service, as many assessments are not designed for people with dementia. That is why I support Dementia UK's call for the Government urgently to review the NHS continuing healthcare process. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are considering

a specific focus on how cognitive and behavioural needs are assessed, and say whether dementia specialists will be involved in the continuing healthcare assessment process?

Support for carers is also incredibly important. In May 2024, Hampshire county council changed a local support service, after 12 years and with very little notice. One of my constituents described how the previous provider, the charity Andover Mind, had been a lifeline for him and his wife who was diagnosed with early-onset dementia. The charity offered care advice, legal guidance and hosted social events that helped to build supportive networks at an incredibly difficult time. My constituents feel that the new service is focused on short-term emergency response rather than comprehensive support.

At present, the care system relies heavily on unpaid carers, who are usually family members, and people with dementia often rely on a combination of unpaid and formal social care. Two thirds of unpaid carers are women, and a third provide more than 100 hours of care a week. This is a full-time job with no pay, little rest, and far too little recognition. As my constituent Julia said,

“post diagnosis, there was just very little help”.

While caring for her husband, she found that she had to do her own research and reading to get him the care he needed. She is concerned, however, that her husband is better off than many others who do not have family advocating on their behalf. Clearly, there is a growing need for a minimum standard of good quality, post-diagnosis support for people with dementia and their carers.

I urge the Government to commit to providing guidance and ringfenced funding to ensure that there is a specialist dementia nurse service in every NHS acute trust. I support the demand for a bold, new diagnosis target, urgent action to reduce waiting lists, and improved dementia diagnosis data collection and publication to drive greater accountability. There is also a discussion to be had about dementia-specific training for care workers. Last year in England, only 45% of care workers received dementia-specific training, which highlights the scale of the problem. Will the Government implement the Alzheimer's Society's recommendation that dementia training should be mandatory across the adult social care workforce?

I have spoken in this Chamber on previous occasions about the impact of dementia and Alzheimer's on my own family, and how after a loved one is diagnosed with this terrible disease, we lose them twice. With our rapidly ageing population, it is critical that more support is given to families coping with dementia, so they do not have to jump through hoops to get support, and so that those living with dementia and Alzheimer's are treated with the specialist care and dignity they deserve.

5.43 pm

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate. Caring for a relative with dementia is one of the most tremendously difficult things that many people will ever have to do. I pay tribute to the many people in my constituency who are caring for a relative with dementia; it is incredibly challenging. Over time I have spoken to many people on the doorstep whose relatives

were suffering from dementia, and who were finding things very difficult. When I read a dementia care plan, I saw that 51% of carers providing unpaid care in my constituency are providing more than 100 hours a week. That is the most phenomenal commitment, and I thank ever so much all those who are doing that.

I have heard the Minister speak extremely movingly about his family's experiences and I know that he is very committed to improving dementia care in this country. However, it is shocking that at present only about 67% of people with dementia in my constituency will actually receive a diagnosis. I recently spoke to a resident whose mother has been in a care home with advanced dementia for three years, but is still undiagnosed. As long as we do not have a full set of diagnoses, we cannot properly explore good healthcare outcomes for people, what proportionate spend would look like and how we can improve the system generally.

A huge amount of unpaid care is provided by women—although, of course, there are people of all genders providing it and I salute everyone who does so—which is one reason why the gender pay gap doubles when women are in their 40s. Work by the Women's Budget Group has shown that as well as improving the wellbeing of those providing that care, investment in the care sector could create 2.7 times as many jobs as the same amount of investment in construction. I do not think that we should be providing better care just because there is a good economic basis for doing so—we should be doing it because it is the right thing to do—but it is important to note that there would be huge economic benefits.

I welcome the Government's launch of an independent commission into adult social care as the first step towards creating a national care service. In Cheshire East, there has been inconsistent funding of Admiral nurses, which has led to inconsistent support. I have been impressed by the care provided by local hospices; although traditionally associated with cancer care, they are now often involved in dementia care. I would like us to provide more funding for hospice care as soon as we are able to do so.

The services that people receive are hugely important to them, whether they are delivered in the community or in care homes. A dentist in my constituency has told me that due to an issue with insurance, many dentists are no longer covered to provide services in care homes, which is a huge loss as those people deserve dental care. The Alzheimer's Society has called for dementia training for paid carers, and I agree that we should be moving to do that at pace.

I want to thank not just the unpaid carers, but the volunteers in my constituency who are doing the most incredible work. In Congleton, we have the Congleton Lions dementia buddy scheme and the New Life church "Forget-me-not" group for carers and those living with dementia; we have over 1,000 Dementia Friends in Sandbach and the "Bring me sunshine" group at Sandbach library; we have memory cafés at Alsager library, Astbury village hall and Holmes Chapel Methodist church; and I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone involved in making Holmes Chapel a dementia-friendly village. I have not captured the full range of support provided and I apologise to the groups that I may not have picked up on, but the variety of services provided by people on an unpaid basis across my community is staggering.

However, that does not take away from the fact that we need the right paid services for people in their homes and subsequently in care homes, if that becomes the right choice for families. I thank everyone who is providing enormous support to the people who they care for, across our entire society. I know that hon. Members from all parties will agree that we need to provide more support to those giving that care.

5.48 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for bringing this debate to the House. I would also like to give credit to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash), whose touching tribute to their father reminded me of the grandfather who I knew and loved, before dementia slowly stripped me of that man.

Dementia is a particularly cruel terminal illness and the leading cause of death in the UK. We each know somebody who is watching or who has watched somebody they love slowly fade from dementia. One day, some of our own children will slowly be robbed of us—perhaps, in time, my daughter will slowly suffer my own withdrawal. The very foundations of our characters are the memories of lives lived, and friends and families loved. Dementia steals away those memories, and with each memory lost, so too is a little more of that person. Children and grandchildren, once a source of joy and warmth, become strangers as the void left by lost memories is filled with confusion and fear. Confusion chips away at confidence while fear eats away at empathy. Once only a shadow of the person we love remains, dementia takes their independence. It comes for their speech, their ability to walk and even their ability to eat.

For those who shoulder the burden of care, the impact is profound, provoking competing feelings of sadness, anger and pride. Many do not realise that they are carers and soldier on in their duty to their loved ones without external support. Young carers, such as those I met recently in Twigworth, shoulder their additional responsibility through the most challenging period of their own development. Many do not know that they are carers, and too many are not identified as such by their schools or their authorities.

The financial burden of dementia on the UK economy is £42 billion per year, and £26 billion of that is borne by informal carers. Patients and carers alike are failed by dual crises in social care and the NHS, and the stresses imposed on patients only hasten their decline. Liberal Democrats have consistently called on this Government to address the growing social care crisis with a long-term plan, and I reiterate that we cannot adequately support the NHS without addressing social care.

Other Members have spoken at length about measures that the Government can take. I will not repeat those, but I will say that one area in which the Government can move quickly is dementia care skills, through tailored training for our health and care workers to better understand the needs of dementia patients. Too often, care is not adequately tailored for dementia. In Tewkesbury constituency, I am proud to have Gloucestershire's sole dementia-only nursing home, Wentworth Court. I will be visiting it this week to listen to its needs and learn from its experience, and I will follow up by writing to the Secretary of State.

5.52 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thought this evening that I might appraise the House of the story of Pat and John Hirst from my constituency. Pat was a nurse. She qualified in 1975 at Leeds general infirmary, and the following year she met John while studying in Liverpool. They married in 1978, raised their three sons and settled in Stockton. Pat returned to work after she had had her children, initially in nursing homes, caring for residents with dementia, then later at the University hospital of North Tees, where she worked for more than a decade.

In the final months of Pat's time at the hospital, her performance as a nurse began to decline. Unbeknownst to her colleagues or her family, Pat was displaying the early symptoms of frontotemporal dementia, which we heard about earlier from the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden). Pat's colleagues did not realise that, so disciplinary action was initiated. John believes that Pat would have been dismissed, but she instead decided to retire on her 60th birthday, before the end of that year.

In early 2012, Pat experienced swallowing difficulties. She underwent tests across several hospitals, and the diagnosis came. No further explanation was provided, other than a referral to the local memory clinic—an experience of many people with dementia. That evening, John sat at his computer and searched online for more information. There, alone in his own home, he learned that the average life expectancy from diagnosis was between two and 20 years. He had not realised until that point that dementia could be a terminal illness. I think we can all agree that there must be a better way of finding out such devastating news.

Pat remained aware of her surroundings and her loved ones until the very end. In her final two years, she lost the ability to speak and could communicate only with her eyes. John recalls the look of fear in her eyes when it became clear that end of life care was beginning. At that point, she was fully aware that she was saying goodbye to her husband and her sons. Their grandson Henry is now two years old. He will never know his granny, but John is determined that Henry and others of his generation should grow up in a world where dementia can be diagnosed early, managed better and ultimately cured. John now volunteers with Alzheimer's Research UK, and he recently completed a walk from Teesside to Newcastle to raise awareness and funding. For those not familiar with the area, that is quite a long distance. Even walking, he got there faster than he would have done on the Durham coast line.

In Stockton, we have about 1,300 people suffering from dementia, but it takes six weeks longer for a dementia diagnosis in my constituency than the national average. We clearly need to ensure that people are diagnosed early before symptoms become apparent, but it is also important that we raise awareness with the public and employers that early-onset dementia can and does affect people before retirement age, so that people do not suffer the kind of treatment that Pat did in her last year of employment.

While the impact of dementia is a difficulty for a parent, it adds a new dimension when that person is diagnosed at the age of 30 or 40. We have heard already that if nothing changes, one in two of us will be affected

by dementia, whether individually, living as a carer or both. John speaks not only for himself and for Pat, but for the thousands of families across Stockton North and the country who are facing this condition. We owe it to John and to other families to ensure that the experience of dementia is no longer defined by lengthy waits, lack of information and financial hardship or, indeed, improved by people like John walking long distances from Teesside to Newcastle. Instead, it should be defined by early intervention, compassionate care, and meaningful progress through research.

5.56 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate. I also thank the many Members from all parts of the House who have shared passionate stories, either of their own or of constituents. Far too many people across the UK are living with dementia, a cruel and progressive condition that robs them of their memory, speech and independence. For every person with dementia, there is often a family doing everything they can behind closed doors to hold things together. I have heard from so many, and one of them is my constituent, Claire.

Claire describes her mother, Christine, as a vibrant and sociable woman. She was a devoted mother, a church flower arranger and a proud Harpenden resident of nearly 40 years. However, in her early 60s, Christine started showing signs of confusion, withdrawal and mood swings. Her family noticed something was off, but like so many others, they did not assume it was dementia. Even medical professionals overlooked these signs. Christine's story took a devastating turn in 2018, just four weeks after her daughter Claire had given birth to twins.

At what should have been a joyful and tender time in their family's life, Christine suffered a cardiac arrest. That moment plunged her into mid-stage vascular dementia, a terminal diagnosis with no treatment or cure. After Christine's diagnosis, the family was visited by a nurse once and then told they were being discharged. They received no care plan nor long-term guidance. From then on, care fell entirely to the family. Claire's dad, a retired engineer, became a full-time carer overnight. He learned to administer insulin and to manage medicine, and he joined online courses alongside his daughter.

Support for the family came when Dementia UK got involved in March 2020, and that was great, but unfortunately it was too late to change the trajectory and was tragically interrupted by the pandemic. Admiral nurses, who provide expert guidance for families such as Claire's, could have made all the difference, but demand continues to outstrip supply.

Through it all, Claire created something positive. She saw at first hand the extraordinary power music had to reach her mum, even in the late stages of her dementia, so she set up Sing from the Heart, a community singalong in care settings and online for people with dementia. It was a real pleasure to visit them in the Willow Court care home and to hear Claire play along and the residents enjoying it. It is now a lasting tribute to her mother, who passed away in April last year, aged 73.

Alongside Sing from the Heart in Harpenden and Berkhamsted, we also have the memory café at Harpenden Trust and Open Door. There are so many volunteers,

as mentioned today, working to give that care in the community. Everyone with dementia deserves high-quality care whenever they need it. The Liberal Democrats want everyone to be able to live independently and with dignity, and to receive any care they need in their home whenever possible. That is why we have routinely called on the Government to act now. Their decision to quietly drop cross-party talks on social care and push the delivery of the Casey commission's recommendations to almost a decade away will leave many with dementia, and their families, paying the price. Do the Government accept that dementia care is in crisis, and will they now commit to better funding, so that families in this country do not go through the same hardships of receiving care as Claire and Christine?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I now ask Members to keep their comments to no more than four minutes.

5.59 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): All politics is personal, and I thank right hon. and hon. Members for sharing their personal experiences today. Three years ago, Clackmannanshire became home to the Alzheimer Scotland brain health and dementia resource centre. Alongside other local women, Debbie Cassidy—a constituent of mine—raised in excess of £100,000 and created a first for our country: a dedicated brain hub that helps people understand and manage the factors that affect brain health and what potentially leads to dementia. That is a terrific achievement, and an inspirational example of what can be achieved by local people when they are backed with the right support.

Talking of support, for years Ludgate House in Alloa has been instrumental in providing specialist respite care for people and families with many complex needs, including dementia. Clackmannanshire residents with dementia have received the most compassionate, attentive and brilliant care from the staff—the same dedicated staff who have provided peace of mind to families, allowing them to take a much-needed break from their caring responsibilities. However, there is uncertainty around the future of the respite unit at Ludgate House. This is a consequence of the chronic underfunding and systemic issues within our Scottish social care system.

The possible fate of the respite unit at Ludgate House is representative of a broader crisis in dementia care. In Scotland, over 90,000 people are living with dementia, a number that is projected to rise by 50% by 2040. With that alarming prediction, the removal of that respite unit would leave a significant void in our community, depriving families of essential support and placing additional strain on already overstretched health services. In fact, a recent report from Alzheimer Scotland highlighted the lack of strategic planning in commissioning for long-term care, noting that many people with advanced dementia face monthly care bills of thousands of pounds.

Like people from all over the UK, families from Clackmannanshire have been and continue to be victims of the cost of living crisis, so the possibility of losing the respite unit at Ludgate House does not bear thinking about. In response, I am working with the staff. We have set up a campaign to keep the respite unit open and press the integration joint board for clarity, transparency and—above all else—the continued delivery of this vital

service. The Scottish Government must invest in dementia care, allocating sufficient funding to support existing facilities and develop new community-based care models. There must be equitable access to dementia care regardless of financial circumstances, and we must support people with dementia, their families, carers, and the staff affected by the uncertainty surrounding Ludgate House and, of course, facilities all across Scotland and the UK that face very similar problems.

6.3 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. In my constituency, an estimated 1,638 people are living with dementia, which is above the national average. However, beyond those numbers are the stories of individual people, each with their own unique experience of living with dementia. Dementia does not discriminate; it can impact anyone, robbing them of their best memories and devastating families and friends in its wake.

I also commend those who dedicate themselves to caring for and supporting those with dementia. I have been lucky enough to meet some of them in Melksham and Devizes. Recently, I visited a branch of the Nationwide bank in Devizes, which has been hosting dementia-friendly sessions and acting as a support hub for those with dementia. It was truly heartwarming to see the friendships and bonds formed between the regular customers and the staff, who have undertaken special training to help them.

However, I must also point out the impact that the hike in employers' national insurance contributions is having on care providers, including those providing care for people with dementia. The care sector already operates on a razor-thin margin, and these rises have increased operational costs drastically, affecting not only the budgets of the individuals and local authorities who will be picking up the added burden, but hospices, which are being faced with difficult choices over who they can care for and for how long, and how to raise sufficient funds to continue operating.

6.5 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I, too, thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for initiating this important debate, especially because dementia is the defining health and social care challenge of our time. It is now a leading cause of death in the UK, and one in two of us will be affected in our lifetime, whether through receiving a diagnosis ourselves, caring for a loved one, or both. Yet despite the scale and impact of the condition, people affected by dementia continue to face a fragmented system that all too often leaves them without the support they need when they need it most. Navigating a complex web of health and social care services is exhausting, and for many families it leads to crisis before help arrives.

As the hon. Member explained, there is a postcode lottery, but I am proud of the fact that Wolverhampton is a dementia-friendly city. Through Dementia Connect, a personalised support service from the Alzheimer's Society, people have access to a wide range of help. Whether it involves emotional support, advice on benefits, connection to local support groups or practical tips for

[Mrs Sureena Brackenridge]

living with dementia, the service makes a real difference, enhancing the quality of life for patients and their families.

Alongside that, Wolverhampton's wider dementia pathway—our memory clinics, community health teams, Admiral Nurses, dementia cafés and carer support services—form a crucial safety net for families who are under immense pressure. To every NHS worker and social care professional, and to all the volunteers and the army of unpaid workers who provide support for patients and families in my constituency, I say “Thank you.” Their knowledge, their lived experiences and their absolute dedication are deeply valued and appreciated.

However, local services can only go so far, which is why I am urging the Government to make dementia a core priority in their upcoming NHS 10-year plan. I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister to listen to leading experts such as Dementia UK and Age UK; to ringfence funding for dementia specialist nurses in every NHS acute trust; to embed dementia specialist nurses, such as Admiral Nurses, in neighbourhood health centres; to tackle the delays and disparities in dementia diagnosis—as of April 2025, only 65% of those aged 65 or over who were estimated to have dementia had had a recorded diagnosis—to ensure investment in diagnostic capacity, including memory clinics; and to address the growing concern among older people and unpaid carers about their ability to access these vital services.

Dementia is not just a clinical condition; it is a personal crisis that unfolds in so many living rooms, GP surgeries, hospital wards and care homes across our country. Let us not allow a “geography roulette” to determine the dignity that is needed by every person who is affected by dementia.

6.9 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Dementia is such a cruel disease. Let us be clear that it is not simply part of getting old, yet too often it is treated as though it is inevitable. In my constituency the number of people living with dementia is nearly 40% higher than the national average. One in every 45 adults of all ages has been diagnosed, and we know that the true number is even higher when we include those not diagnosed.

Family members, who provide such amazing care, are relying so heavily on community groups such as Stepping Stones—led by my predecessor and good friend, Dame Annette Brooke—with jigsaws and its tea dances providing moments of joy. The Leonardo Trust provides grants for unpaid carers, and I thank the Museum of East Dorset for its fantastic work in recruiting residents to crochet the over 8,000 forget-me-nots that decorated the town of Wimborne last month.

Neurological conditions such as dementia are the leading cause of illness globally, and as our population ages, the challenge will only grow. However, dementia is not just a disease of old age—some of the most heartbreaking cases are among younger people. A neighbour of mine in Broadstone—a proud veteran, builder and father—was diagnosed in his early 50s. I watched him go from walking past our house without recognising us, to needing a carer by his side and now living full-time in a care home. His daughters, who once

played with mine, will never have their father walk them down the aisle and his wife will never share the retirement they dreamed of.

That is why I did not hesitate to become a dementia research champion. If we do not understand how the brain works and how to stop it failing, we will not get the benefits of extended life expectancy. Today, the *Daily Mirror* has reported that over 100 new drugs are in development to halt dementia, with scientists saying we are at the start of a journey to a cure. Of these drugs, 86% could halt or reverse the disease. However, research alone is not enough, and we must transform the care we give.

Like those of other Members, my constituents are facing a battle just to get the care they need. Andrew was told that his wife Tricia did not qualify for NHS continuing healthcare because it did not meet the NHS-funded nursing criteria of being short term or of optimum potential, despite changing on a daily basis. The council eventually stepped in, but not until Andrew himself had become ill. Why is nursing care not being picked up by the NHS? Surely that is what it is for.

Another constituent, Emma-Jane, told me about her mother, who has dementia and paranoia, and has become abusive. Her father, who had protected his family for so long, once spent the night in a park just to escape. A social worker decided that her mother could not go into a care home, because her mother had wanted to stay at home, despite acknowledging that she lacked the capacity to make such a decision. After accessing respite care when the family reached crisis, Emma-Jane is now funding care privately, while she battles the council because her father simply cannot cope. This is intolerable: families are breaking and councils are overwhelmed.

Kevin wrote to me about his Aunt Jean, now 92, who entered a care home eight years ago. The family home has gone and the money has gone, so the council must step in, but the care home fees are nearly double the local authority cap. Even with Jean's pension and a discount from the care company, there is a £300 a week shortfall, leaving the family to choose between paying out of their own pocket or moving her from the place she has called home for nearly a decade. To put that into perspective, the cost of caring for Jean for one year, after her pension contribution, is equivalent to the total annual council tax of 24 households. If every dementia patient in my constituency needed council tax funded care, it would consume the council tax of 43,000 homes, and I have only 44,000 in the whole constituency.

We must act: we must invest in research, support carers, and reform how we fund and deliver care. I call on the Minister to push for faster progress on the Casey report. There is no choice: the cost of inaction is too high for our families, our communities and our country.

6.13 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): There is no doubt that dementia is the biggest health challenge of our time. It is the leading cause of death in the UK, and there will not be a single family across our country that is not touched by this illness. I suspect that for most of in this House, if not all, it will be no different.

I look to my own experience with my mum, who developed a condition when she was aged 62 or 63. My mum, Phyllis McAllister, a nurse, nursing sister and

midwife—a carer by profession—was also an unpaid carer to my late father, after he suffered a stroke, until she could care no more, with the carer now needing care.

It is often said that it can be a postcode lottery when it comes to the provision of dementia care, both at home and in residential care. My family and I were very fortunate in that our experience was a positive one. The provision of dementia healthcare services is the responsibility of local integrated healthcare boards. That is the case across the UK. My Labour-run administration in West Dunbartonshire provided outstanding home care services on a daily basis to allow my mother to remain in her home for as long as possible. However, the highly dedicated team of home carers are often expected to do more for their clients with reduced times. Those are the consequences of the cuts to local government and health and social care budgets from central Government over the last decade. They are played out on the frontline of dementia care.

I served as a councillor on West Dunbartonshire council for 21 years and I am very proud of our record on the provision of dementia care. As an administration, we took the bold step—the brave yet correct decision—to continue to offer local authority-run residential care homes. We built two large, state-of-the-art care homes: Crosslet House in Dumbarton; and Queens Quay in Clydebank, where my mother now receives quite outstanding care by a highly dedicated team of care staff, which my brother and I are so appreciative of. I refer to that, because it demonstrates what all local authorities and integrated care boards could and should provide, given the correct support and funding from central Government.

I want my UK Labour Government to prioritise a society where every person with dementia receives high-quality, compassionate care, from diagnosis through to end of life care. We must commit to improving dementia care and empower our local leaders with the autonomy they need to provide the best services to their local community. That means the UK Labour Government learning the lessons of SNP failure. Early this year, the Scottish Government formally abandoned their national care service plan, scaling back their flagship policy of centralised control under a single national body, wasting time and money—£30 million wasted, money that could have delivered 1 million extra hours of care, stopped care packages being cut and provided the essential dementia care that families across Scotland are so desperate for.

There is a role for central Government. The Labour Government's 10-year health plan provides a key opportunity to fix dementia care. It starts with a blueprint for transforming early dementia diagnosis. Diagnosis late in the progression of the disease costs all of us so much more. Early diagnosis is vital to ensure people with dementia can access the treatment and support they need. Our 10-year plan should include bold, brave commitments to funding and providing our NHS with groundbreaking new treatment, medicines and research, including clinical trials of promising new dementia drugs. I urge the Minister to commit our Labour Government to improving dementia care across the board: causes, diagnosis, prevention, treatment, care and support.

6.17 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I wanted to share some of my experiences and, with her support, the experiences of my office manager, Becca. Becca and I agreed that the issue we wanted to raise in the debate is dignity.

Becca's nan, Pat, lived with dementia for over a decade. She received care both at home and, later, in a specialist dementia care home. At home, the care she received was poor. When carers visited, Pat was left in inappropriate clothing, unwashed or not taken to the toilet. Her husband, then in his late 80s, and their daughters were left to care for her. When Pat moved into a care home, the quality of care improved. The staff clearly cared for her, and over time she became one of the longest-residing residents. Some carers treated her like family. But even in a good care home, the pressures of understaffing meant that dignity was often the first thing to be compromised.

Pat's husband and daughter visited her every day. They noticed that she was frequently dressed in clothes that did not belong to her, despite everything being clearly labelled. Sometimes, other residents wore the outfits her family had chosen for Pat. As a result, Pat was often left in ill-fitting clothes. Worse, carers did not always have time to take Pat to the toilet. Pat's daughter would have to raise that she had to go to the toilet, or that she needed to be cleaned and dressed. Every day, she had to advocate for her mother to ensure that she was treated with the dignity she deserved.

My nan, Hilda Duffield, was born Hilda Caunt in 1918. By the time she was 90, Hilda—nan—was losing mobility and suffering memory loss. Ted, my grandad, had become her devoted carer and took over all the domestic tasks. After some time, nan was diagnosed with dementia. I remember the disease becoming increasingly entangled with and amplifying her already worrisome nature. She started to become angry, flying off the handle with stress over where grandad was—whether he was in the next room or had popped to the shop. The disease took an increasing hold over her as time progressed.

My nan and grandad continued to manage together for several years, but the situation changed rapidly when grandad became ill himself in autumn 2012. When he was admitted to hospital, it was clear that nan needed full-time care. After a few weeks in residential care, she was moved to the same nursing hospital as grandad, and she was present at his bedside when he died in January 2013. They had been married for 73 years.

With my grandad's death, my nan's dementia worsened. She was moved to a care home near my uncle Neil in Bolton, as he and my aunt Eileen would be able to spend time with her during the day. I, however, never saw my nan again after she moved to Bolton. By all accounts, by that stage she had no memory of me or of much of my family. She spent her days hallucinating and had become abusive to care home staff; I remember my uncle Neil telling me how he regularly heard her screaming words he did not know she knew at people who were trying to help her. We decided as a family that there was no benefit to me or to several other family members visiting, and that it was better for everyone who could to remember her as she was before her mind was taken by that cruel disease. I do not know if that was the right thing to do. I never will.

[Adam Thompson]

By the end, like Pat and so many others who suffer with dementia, my nan had lost her dignity to that disease. She had lost everything and needed those around her to maintain her dignity for her. In Erewash and across the country, so many more have stories like those I have shared today. Not all those suffering have someone who can advocate for them, but I hope I have gone some way towards doing so today, as have my colleagues across the House—my gratitude goes out to all of them.

6.21 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this important debate and on her excellent speech, and I wish her father-in-law and cousin all the very best.

I have been the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia for the past 10 years. Like my co-chair, Baroness Angela Browning, I became involved because of a loved one who had acquired the disease. In my case, it was my mum, who was also called Angela and who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease at 64; along with my stepfather and brother, I cared for her until she died in 2012. After her death, I became a dementia friends champion—the first MP to do so—which allowed me to do a number of dementia friends sessions. As a consequence, we have hundreds of people involved in Oldham, and have set up a dementia-friendly Oldham, with an annual memory walk and lots of other groups that support families affected by dementia. I am very proud of that.

I appreciate that the Government have yet to publish any plans on dementia, but given that dementia, as we have heard today, is the leading cause of death in the UK—above heart disease and above cancer—and affects nearly 1 million people, with an equivalent number of carers, I know that the Minister will give it the focus and attention it deserves. We have also heard that a quarter of NHS beds are occupied by someone with dementia who is fit and able to be discharged, but who cannot be discharged because of the crisis in social care.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): People with degenerative conditions stay under consultant care, but after 18 months my constituent with Alzheimer's was discharged with no monitoring and no access to specialist nurses unless referred by a very lengthy GP process. He told me that he feels abandoned. Does the hon. Lady agree that dementia must be treated as seriously as other long-term conditions, and that everyone with dementia should have access to a specialist nurse and an annual health and care review?

Debbie Abrahams: That is a very long question. I certainly believe that we need to improve care. Dementia is obviously an umbrella term for several different diseases, and we cannot make recommendations that apply to each specific disease; I think that has unfortunately not had the airing that it might have.

The APPG has undertaken a number of inquiries of which I am incredibly proud. A few years ago, we published "Workforce Matters", which is still very relevant today. We have heard some of the recommendations around specialist care. Unfortunately, we have a postcode lottery; the APPG heard some fantastic examples of care,

but also some not-so-great examples. There was also a survey of nearly 2,000 people. There is still lots to do there, and I hope the Minister will look at those recommendations. Our "Raising the Barriers" report around the inequalities in dementia diagnosis also needs further attention. Those inequalities are not just by geography, but by different cohorts of people.

In my last minute or so, I will talk about prevention, as we have heard only a little reference to that. With young-onset dementia, we are able to track the start of changes in people's brains from the age of 30 that are associated with different cognitive diseases. What is good for our heart is also good for our head, but there are other things to consider, including reducing air pollution. We know that smoking and heart disease is a real no-no, as is obesity and high blood pressure. It is also important to be on top of hearing loss and related issues. Excess alcohol consumption is another factor; fewer than 14 units a week is the guidance for a healthy life, but 18 is excessive.

Social isolation is really bad for dementia, as is traumatic brain injury. I am supporting Football Families for Justice, which is run by Nobby Stiles's son, to try to get compensation and support for footballers who have been affected by their sport throughout their careers and are suffering from brain diseases as a consequence. We are calling on football authorities to take responsibility. Footballers are now paid fantastically well, but that was not the case in the past and we need to make sure that those players are cared for; this is an occupational disease.

6.26 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. We have heard many moving speeches this afternoon, and it has been a great honour to sit and listen to them.

We must remember that dementia is not a fact of life, or something that everyone must face as they get older. It is not inevitable as a part of ageing. Dementia is a disease—a dreadful disease at that. Some 1.5 million people will be living with dementia in this country by 2040, so let us treat dementia with the same seriousness that we treat all other deadly conditions. Let us not neglect dementia simply because it disproportionately affects older people.

At present, we have a fragmented and complex health system that does not provide a clear enough route for people with dementia. Let us improve specialist dementia support in hospitals and in the community. It is simply our duty to do so. The estimated economic impact of dementia in the UK last year was £42.5 billion. By contrast, we learned yesterday that the defence budget is £58 billion. It is suggested that, by 2040, the dementia budget will be £90 billion, so something must be done.

Improving the treatment of dementia in our communities and in primary care settings will certainly help to free up hospitals and care systems, because, as we have heard, people with dementia occupy a quarter of all the hospital beds in the country. Let us move dementia treatment into the communities, with specialist nurses in communities to ease the pressure. Dementia is not inevitable. We must be bold, optimistic and forward-thinking, and prepared to deploy radical advances in science to tackle the condition. Let us support our

scientists and researchers as they strive to develop more effective treatments and make progress towards curing the disease.

Let us support research by enabling the NHS to empower its clinicians to conduct research and to use patient data. That would help to facilitate medical research and increase the number of clinical academics, whose number has been declining for much too long.

I was delighted to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) talk about hearing loss. Many members will know that I am an ear, nose and throat surgeon. Hearing loss is absolutely central to the problem of people withdrawing from the society in which they live. The simple testing of hearing and the provision of hearing aids will do much to help. I urge Members of a certain age to consider having a hearing test.

I am interested to know what we can do with patient data. If researchers across the country ran studies on 67 million people, we would accelerate progress towards a cure. Artificial intelligence could be set to work analysing datasets and providing rich sources of longitudinal data to inform future research and cures. Artificial intelligence already models the folding of proteins that cause the disease, so to secure those benefits, let us do something about the collection of medical information, and let us prioritise openness by giving patients access to their medical records, allowing them to see how the information is being used to support the NHS. That is something we could do to help.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

6.30 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. Listening to the stories from Members on all sides of the House, it is clear that this is not simply a political debate; it is deeply personal to pretty much everyone here.

My father had dementia. He was a typical Irish farmer; he was very strong-willed, physically tough and fiercely independent, and he was used to working all hours of the day. Watching that man slip away, becoming increasingly confused, anxious and very often unreasonably angry, was one of the most heartbreaking experiences of my life. I know I am not alone in experiencing that, as we have heard very similar stories.

Many Members have said that with dementia we lose the person we love twice—first slowly, piece by piece, and then again at the end. The final loss can feel like a relief, because it is a prolonged bereavement; the grief starts sometimes years before. Dementia is a brutal disease, not just for those who are experiencing it but for those who are caring. For spouses, children and families, it is relentless emotional toil, sleepless nights and endless juggling of tasks.

Sarah Dyke: My hon. Friend shares his experience of losing his father. I lost my father in the same way, and he too was a proud farming man. I want to raise an issue from a constituent who contacted me about her father James. He is currently alone in a room in a hospital, and he is scared to mix with other violent

dementia patients. He wants to be at home, and the family want him to be at home, but there are barriers in social care in Somerset at the moment. Does my hon. Friend agree that dementia patients should be able to live independently at home, with dignity, and receive the care—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Chambers: Yes, I agree that empowering people to live as independently as possible is hugely important.

For me, there was guilt—for many years actually. I felt guilty about the moments of resentment at how my job and career were affected, and for losing patience when faced with the anger of someone you are trying to care for. I remember that my dad did not really understand that all we were trying to do was help. I want to mention the very insightful piece of advice from the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) not to argue with people who have dementia. I wish I had understood when we were caring for my father that there was no need to correct his current understanding of the world. My grandfather was born in 1870, and my father kept asking where he was. We tried to explain that he would have been aged 130 if he had still been alive, but I wonder why we had those discussions. That was a hugely important and emotive piece of advice.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): When I led a district council, one thing we tried to do was take initiatives to make us more dementia-friendly. There is some excellent training run by the Alzheimer's Society. Does the hon. Member agree that all MPs' offices should be seeking to take such initiatives so that we can be compassionate in the way that he describes?

Dr Chambers: I completely agree with what the hon. Member has just suggested. There is no way that we can approach dementia without a huge amount of compassion and empathy.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for drawing attention to the issue of not seeking to correct those with dementia on where they think they are. In that respect, dementia care and understanding have come a long way, and in fact it is now standard not to try to do that. I thank the hon. Member, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), for raising that issue in the Chamber.

Dr Chambers: I remember trying to explain to my father about the sheepdog, which he loved to train but which he did not recognise as his own any more. That is unusual for a farmer. There was no need to have that discussion; it was heartbreaking. The dog loved my dad and dad did not recognise him any more was very upsetting. This all still feels very raw, but as we have heard today, my story is not in any way unique. There are so many families in Winchester and around the country who are experiencing that similar, heartbreaking journey.

Caring for my father is one of the hardest things that my family has ever done. I pay tribute to my mother, who bore the brunt of caring for my father for many years; to my sister Irene, who helped hugely for years and years; to my cousin Patrick; and to our neighbours James and Deborah Hodgson—we could not have managed

[*Dr Chambers*]

without them. However, especially nearer the end, we could not have done without the extraordinary support of the care workers who came to help on a regular basis. Their compassion, skill and dedication helped get us through some of the darkest days.

That dedication was extraordinary. Dad loved singing and one of our care workers had printed out some of the songs that he knew—some old Methodist hymns, “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Danny Boy”, which was his favourite song and the song that I am named after. He might not have remembered our dog, but he could remember every word of “Danny Boy” when he was singing it. The dedication of the care workers, to find out someone’s favourite song and then sing it with them, was quite extraordinary.

Care workers, who are vital and skilled, are often underpaid, undervalued and stretched beyond endurance. We just cannot allow that to continue. That is why the Liberal Democrats call for urgent and meaningful reform of social care—reform that starts with recognising and properly rewarding and supporting the workforce who underpin it. We have been calling for a national social care workforce plan—not for the can to be kicked further down the road, but a real plan to address recruitment, retention and training, with practical steps to fix the staffing crisis. We want to establish a royal college of care workers to give care professionals the recognition and career development that they deserve. I pay tribute to Liz Blacklock from Winchester, who runs Lapis Care based in Bishop’s Waltham, where I went on some visits a few weeks ago. Liz has long been calling for a formal register of care workers, which would be one of the functions of any new royal college of care workers.

Liberal Democrats also call for a national carers register, so that all unpaid family carers can be better supported, for example with statutory respite care. We also call for a higher carer’s minimum wage, because paying poverty wages for such emotionally and physically demanding work is not only unjust but short-sighted and drives burnout, turnover and, ultimately, worse care.

Let us be clear: dementia is not going away. One in three people born today will develop dementia. The hon. Member for Worthing West (*Dr Cooper*), with her public health experience, was insightful in her advice on how we can help to prevent it from developing.

The financial pressures on local authorities, driven in large part by adult social care, are among the most urgent political challenges of this decade. In Winchester, the Chesil Lodge day centre provides essential care for older adults, including those with dementia, and importantly provides respite care for family members. Hampshire county council is threatening to withdraw funding. That could overwhelm unpaid carers, forcing loved ones into residential care, which in the end will cost the council and taxpayers more.

With the political will, proper investment and genuine commitment to value and care work, we can build a system that supports people with dementia with dignity and gives their families the help and hope they so desperately need.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

6.39 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I think we have established that dementia is a thief, not once but twice: first of the mind, then of the memories, leaving the greatest pain not with the sufferer but with those who remember. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (*Caroline Voaden*) for securing such an important debate and for speaking so passionately and openly about her story, as did many across this House. I also thank the Alzheimer’s Society, Alzheimer’s Research UK, Dementia UK and all those people who advocate for dementia and their families. As we have heard, there are 1 million people living with dementia in the UK, and that figure is projected to rise to 1.4 million by 2040. One in six hospital beds are occupied by dementia patients, and dementia sufferers are three times more likely to see their GP. Modelling suggests that 70% of care home residents are people living with dementia.

In this House I often enjoyed the tired lines from the then Opposition about how the Conservatives never did enough on x or y or z. As Labour Members are ably demonstrating, it is easy to stand across the aisle and say that nothing is ever enough, but as they are learning, delivering in the real world is far harder than demanding from the sidelines. On dementia, the Conservative Government led from the front with more funding, better diagnosis and a national commitment to change lives. We all agree that we must continue to do more, but to do that we need direction and action, and that is what we are exploring here today, almost one year on from the introduction of a Labour Government.

Debbie Abrahams: Can the shadow Minister remind us about the commitment in the 2019 Conservative manifesto on the dementia moonshot and tell us if and when that was delivered?

Dr Evans: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I am going to canter through what we have done in the past 14 years, because it was, after all, under the premiership of Lord Cameron that the challenge on dementia set the ambition for England to be

“the best country in the world for dementia care and support and for people with dementia, their carers and families to live”.

So, on to the point. In 2012, the then Prime Minister set the challenge to make us a global leader and increase awareness and research. This included the dementia friends initiative—a public campaign to boost understanding, over 1 million dementia friends trained by 2015 and increased research funding, which doubled from 2010 to 2015. In 2015, the Prime Minister’s challenge on dementia 2020 set national goals for diagnosis rates, care quality and research impact, including a national target for dementia diagnosis rates of 66.7%, which was met in 2015.

In 2016 and 2017, the UK Dementia Research Institute, launched under Theresa May, was a flagship initiative backed by £290 million from the Government and charities. This actually delivered £300 million in dementia research and innovation by March 2020, a full year ahead of schedule. We had the NHS long-term plan in 2019, which committed to enhancing diagnosis. In 2019 we also had the dementia moonshot pledge from Boris Johnson, with an extra £160 million. This was followed up in 2022 with the Dame Barbara Windsor dementia mission—a £95 million fund to accelerate research into

treatment and early diagnosis. Of course, the pandemic hit and we had the recovery, and that is why the Government set out the 2023 major conditions strategy, which would have included dementia.

There is therefore a question for this Government as to the priority they have given to dementia since taking office, and it is worth looking at why concerns are being raised. This Government, rightly so in their own right, did not opt to proceed with the major conditions strategy. That might surprise some Members, as we heard the current Minister, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who is in her place, call for a dedicated dementia strategy a number of times when she was in opposition. Only last year, she said the following in a Westminster Hall debate on new dementia treatments:

“As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth said, it is disappointing that the Government shelved the plans for a dedicated dementia strategy. England remains the only nation without a specific dementia plan. That is very short-term thinking, and it would be interesting to hear from the Minister about that. In 2022, I said:

‘We cannot give confidence to people suffering with dementia and their carers without a much clearer plan that is in place very quickly.’—[Official Report, 14 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 141.]

That remains the case today.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 192WH.]

So I would like to ask the Minister: does he stand by these comments and can we therefore expect a dedicated dementia strategy? It is easy for the Conservative side of the House to understand that governing is difficult. Good intentions make fine Opposition speeches until they collide with reality. Does the Minister plan to carry on with a dedicated strategy, and would he be kind enough to confirm that today?

On the topic of strategies and comments made by Labour Ministers before they took office, I note that in a Westminster Hall debate on inequalities in dementia services only in May last year, less than a week before the general election was called, the shadow Health Minister and now the independent hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne) promised a carers strategy. He said that carers are

“a vital part of the fight against dementia, and they will be at the heart of Labour’s plans in Government. There will be a carers strategy under the next Labour Government, because we value the vital work our carers do. It will be a cross-Government strategy with the Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education and the future of work review all feeding into it along with the Department of Health and Social Care. There is a brighter future for those living with dementia and their families and carers. Labour will deliver it.”—[Official Report, 16 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 228WH.]

That is a laudable aim.

However, since the election, it appears that all is not quite as it seems. In an oral question in the other place in November, Baroness Merron made it clear that she had “not committed to a national carers strategy”, stating,

“I do have to say to the noble Baroness that I have not committed to a national carers strategy. However, in our joined-up approach, we will certainly be looking at what is needed. That will be very much part of our considerations on the workforce strategy, which Minister Karin Smyth will be leading on. It is crucial to the delivery of services.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 19 November 2024; Vol. 841, c. 107.]

I therefore ask the Minister today whether specific plans are still in place for a national care strategy.

Joe Robertson: As my hon. Friend knows, at the beginning of the year, the Government and NHS England removed dementia from their planning guidance, which sets their priorities for the year ahead. Crucially, they removed the diagnosis targets. That was a cruel blow to people living with dementia and their families. Will the Minister give his view on the Government removing dementia from their targets and priorities?

Dr Evans: I am grateful, first, for my hon. Friend promoting me and, secondly, for his expertise in this area because I understand that he has worked with Dementia UK. He is absolutely right—he has beaten me to the chase. One of the real concerns that charities and patients have raised is exactly that: the removal of this crucial diagnosis target. We only need to look at Wales where that was not the case. The national diagnosis rate is 56%—10% lower than in England.

On top of that, the Government are presiding over a major top-down restructuring with cuts to integrated care boards and NHS England, while forcing through devolution on the 21 county-run authorities responsible for social care, while raising taxes in the employment national insurance contribution on care providers, which will get passed on to local councils, while raising taxes on the very dementia charities and others that provide support, while ditching the fast-track social work scheme as we learned last week, while terminating the NHS and care volunteers response that helps support care, and while scrapping the cross-party talks on social care and instead swapping it to an independent commission led by Baroness Casey, who still seconded to the Home Office. We can all see what is being taken away and taxed. It is what is going to benefit dementia support and care that is much harder to spot.

In the rough and tumble of this place, it is not lost on me how much this issue touches the Minister himself. He has spoken bravely and openly about his family’s struggle, and I have the utmost respect for him and what he has been through, and I have been through similar with my grandmother Dot. I do not question his heart; I simply gently challenge the Government on their policies to achieve better dementia care for all.

To that end, I have a couple of questions. Will the Government commit to setting a new target to increase dementia diagnosis rates across England? With integrated care systems facing restructuring and budget resolutions, how does the Government plan to hold local systems to account on dementia diagnosis, especially across the NHS and social care? We have seen in Wales how irregular data collection on dementia diagnosis affects overall diagnosis rates. What steps will the Government take to improve the quality of data in dementia diagnosis, particularly when it comes to follow up? Given the growing prevalence of dementia in our care homes, what steps will the Government take to support providers and ensure that the social care workforce is trained effectively to meet the needs of care users?

With the upcoming spending review and the long-awaited 10-year plan for the NHS expected in the next couple of months, I trust the Minister sitting in front of me. He is the right person to highlight to the Government the seriousness and importance of tackling dementia, just like the last Government understood.

[Dr Luke Evans]

I return to where I started: dementia steals the most from those left remembering, because the greatest heartbreak is losing someone who is still here. But with compassion for families, dignity for those who suffer and the relentless pursuit of a cure, we can offer not just care, but hope.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate, and I commend her for her work as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia. It has been a thoughtful and constructive debate, with a number of truly powerful and moving personal contributions from Members across the Chamber.

This is a cause that is close to my heart. I thank all Members for their kind words about my own family, but our history is far from unique. We know that one in two of us will be affected by dementia in our lifetime—by caring for someone with the condition, developing it ourselves, or both. It is predicted that just under 1.5 million people in England will be living with dementia by 2040. Each person, along with their loved ones and carers, has a unique journey and their own heartbreaking stories. On behalf of the Government, I thank everyone working to support people with dementia, as well as their friends, families and carers. This Government will back them every step of the way. We are also backing our scientists to deliver new treatments and ways to care for people living with dementia, and I recently had the pleasure of visiting the UK Dementia Research Institute's centre for care and technology, where I saw some of its innovative smart-home tools.

A timely diagnosis is vital to ensure that everyone can access the advice, information and support that can help them to live well with dementia and remain independent for as long as possible. This Government remain committed to the national ambition for two thirds of people living with dementia to receive a formal diagnosis. We are funding evidence-based improvement projects to pilot the diagnosing advanced dementia mandate in 14 trusts. I am delighted that best practice is currently being shared and promoted with regional and local partners, following an impact assessment of the pilots.

Dementia can impact anyone, but there is varying and unequal access to health services. That is why the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is working to make our country fairer by developing a tool that provides a clear assessment of population characteristics, such as rurality and socioeconomic deprivation.

Joe Robertson: I welcome the Minister's confirmation of his commitment to the diagnosis target of two thirds. Will he put that in a key document—the equivalent of the planning guidance for NHS England? Will he ensure that that is well documented and set out in a strategic document, so that we can be absolutely clear and are not relying on his oral assertions in this Chamber?

Stephen Kinnock: We are absolutely on the record with the 66.7% target.

I want to take this opportunity to set out what appears to be a philosophical difference between this Government's approach to our health and care system and that of many Opposition Members. We believe in

devolution, we believe in decentralisation, and we believe in empowering those who are closest to the citizen to make the decisions that need to be made. If others have a more centralising and deeply anachronistic approach to managing our health and care system, which I heard from Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members, that is up to them, but we believe in modernising our system, not micromanaging or having shopping lists of targets. It is about providing support and agreeing on outcomes, but leaving those who are best placed at the coalface to decide how best to meet the unmet needs of their communities. That is a very clear dividing line between us.

On research, it is worth pointing out that we have done studies with UK Research and Innovation, the Alzheimer's Society and the People's Postcode Lottery. We have found that through our investment, ADAPT and READ-OUT are working to produce clinical and economic data that could bring blood tests to the NHS within five years to support the diagnosis of dementia. All of this means that the rate of diagnosis is improving. The latest data from April shows that the diagnosis rate has inched up to 65.5%, up 0.3% since July 2024, and it is worth noting that the 66.7% ambition has not been met since 2020.

The quality and availability of care services is variable, as Members have pointed out. We are empowering local leaders with the autonomy they need. We are supporting integrated care boards. I am pleased to say that we recently published the Dementia 100 pathway assessment tool, which brings together multiple resources into a single, consolidated training tool. That launched last month, and there has been huge interest and support from the sector, with 1,000 people registering to attend the launch webinar. We have the dementia care pathway full implementation guidance, and we are supporting the implementation of that guidance through a dashboard, to enable targeted support where it is needed.

All those who have dementia deserve to receive high-quality care. We must have a workforce that is equipped with the skills that are needed. We are incredibly proud of everyone who works in the care sector, and they deserve the training that many Members have mentioned. The care workforce pathway provides guidance for progression and development for professionals across adult social care with the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours that our carers need. It links learning outcomes to existing frameworks, including the dementia training standards framework.

Some of those learning outcomes can be achieved through the training and qualifications eligible for funding under the learning and development support scheme. That scheme, launched in September last year, supports adult social care employers to invest in their workforce through funded training opportunities, including a range of dementia-related qualifications. I am pleased to confirm that we have backed the scheme with a £12 million investment. Pay and conditions are also vital elements of our workforce strategy, so I am sure Members across the House will welcome our groundbreaking fair pay agreement legislation in the Employment Rights Bill for adult social care workers, which is hugely significant in this context.

On the question of our care workforce, a number of Members have highlighted the vital role that unpaid carers play. To support them, on 7 April the Government

increased the carer's allowance weekly earnings limit from £151 a week to £196 a week, which is the equivalent of 16 hours at the national living wage—the largest increase in the earnings limit since the carer's allowance was introduced in 1976. We are very proud of that change.

I understand that every person with dementia, alongside their friends, families and carers, has their own unique and important story of living with dementia. I know that I am not alone in this fight. I want to pay tribute to the Alzheimer's Society, Dementia UK and Alzheimer's Research UK for all their vital work. Together, we will build a society where every person with dementia receives high-quality care from diagnosis through to the end of life. I once again thank the hon. Member for South Devon for raising this vital topic.

6.57 pm

Caroline Voaden: I do not think there is much to add, but I want to thank all the Members who have come here today and shared their personal experiences of dementia affecting family members and loved ones. I know it is not an easy thing to do, and we all have really difficult experiences. It has been very moving to hear those personal stories. We have a Minister who deeply feels these issues and understands what dementia means and the impact on the wider family.

I would like to see properly trained dementia nurses in every GP surgery and acute hospital trust in this country, so that we can keep these people at home, look after them, look after their carers, and support the people who love them and do an incredible job. I pay tribute to the hundreds of organisations all over the country that are doing amazing work, many of them on a voluntary basis.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered dementia care.

Debbie Abrahams: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In his response to my question about the dementia moonshot, I think the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), might have got his figures wrong. Could you advise me on how we can correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for raising that point of order. It is not a matter for the Chair, but she has put her point on the record.

PETITIONS

Waste Provision on Lea Hall Road, in the Garretts Green Ward in Birmingham, Hodge Hill and Solihull North

6.59 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of residents of Garretts Green ward in Birmingham. The petition, assisted by local councillor Saddak Miah, has the full support of residents, whose quality of life has been badly affected by the lack of access to general waste bins. Although recycling bins are provided, Birmingham city council says that there is “red tape” that affects

residents' right to a general waste bin. They have to put their black bags straight out on to the streets, which has attracted fly-tipping and vermin. I do not think residents should have to live like that, treading over rats on their way to work and school, so I am laying this petition to call for action. My constituent Yasmeen Bhatti spoke for many when she told me that the constant rubbish is severely impacting families with young children and those with mobility issues, and that a solution is urgently needed. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Birmingham Council to take immediate action to ensure that all residents on Lea Hall road, in the Garretts Green ward have access to general waste bins, and that these bins are collected by Birmingham city council.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the Garretts Green Ward, Birmingham,

Declares that residents in Garretts Green who reside on top of a grass verge need to have access to a general waste bin; further that Birmingham Council must remove the red tape that is stopping the existence of general waste bins on Lea Hall Road, in the Garretts Green area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Birmingham Council to take immediate action to ensure that all residents on Lea Hall Road, in the Garretts Green Ward have access to general waste bins, and that these bins are collected by Birmingham City Council.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003077]

Construction of an Underpass at the Bicester Level Crossing

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I rise to present this petition from the residents of Bicester who want a replacement for the level crossing at London road, which will close with the introduction of east-west rail services, cutting the town in two. I am grateful to the 4,526 residents who have individually signed this petition, and to those who worked so hard to gather the signatures, many of whom are sitting in the Gallery tonight. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the construction of an underpass at the London Road level crossing in Bicester that could accommodate car users as well as cyclists and pedestrians.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Bicester,

Declares that proposals to close the London Road Level Crossing as part of the East West Rail development have failed to reflect the strong local preference for an underpass that accommodates light vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians; and notes that widespread community support for such an underpass has been expressed through public meetings, correspondence and local engagement.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the construction of an underpass at the London Road level crossing in Bicester that could accommodate car users as well as cyclists and pedestrians.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003078]

Banking Hub for Selkirk and Eyemouth

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I rise to present this petition from my constituents in the Scottish Borders to the House of Commons. It calls on LINK to set up a banking hub for Selkirk and Eyemouth. I want to record my thanks to the many local residents who have signed this petition.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk,

Declares that residents of Selkirk and Eyemouth are being left without proper access to cash and banking facilities. This is causing significant concern and worry for the local community, and that LINK should take the necessary steps to tackle this by setting up a banking hub in each of the towns. Further that a separate online petition on the same issue has generated 1,456 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to ensure that the residents of Selkirk and Eyemouth have access to a Banking Hub, with proper access to cash and banking facilities.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003079]

Yeovil Hospital: Maternity Unit

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)

7.4 pm

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I start by thanking the fantastic staff at Yeovil district hospital's maternity unit and paediatric staff across the country for their hard work. I also thank the Minister for Secondary Care for coming to the Chamber this evening to respond to the issues raised, which are important for Yeovil and South Somerset.

In January, the Care Quality Commission inspected paediatric services at Yeovil district hospital. It issued a section 29A notice because it assessed that the hospital failed to meet regulations relating to staffing and governance, and therefore required significant improvement. On Monday 12 May, the hospital trust decided to temporarily close the special care baby unit at YDH from 19 May, initially for six months. That means that the hospital will also be unable to safely provide care during labour and birth at the maternity unit, meaning that the unit is effectively closed. Care of pregnant people due to give birth will now be transferred to Musgrove Park in Taunton, Dorchester county hospital, the Royal United hospital in Bath or Salisbury hospital.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I am sure that my hon. Friend knows about the problems that we have had at Tiverton district hospital. I was lucky enough to have had my three sons at the old Tiverton hospital. I am sure that people not being able to go to Yeovil hospital to give birth will push down—literally—into Tiverton hospital, but I remind my hon. Friend that there was an incident a couple of years ago when one of my constituents delivered her fifth child in a pub car park, because Tiverton hospital did not have the capacity to take her in. Does he agree that the closure of maternity services at Yeovil hospital impacts not just Dorset and Somerset, but the hospital in my constituency?

Adam Dance: I agree with my hon. Friend and I will come to that point later in my remarks.

In letters and at meetings, I have directly asked senior leaders at the trust for reassurance that the service will reopen after six months, but they have been unable to give it. My No. 1 priority is my constituents' health and safety. I appreciate that the decision was difficult and that patient safety was at its heart. The safety of mothers and their babies must come first, but the way in which the decision was reached and implemented has been disgraceful. It has created huge fear and anger in Yeovil and may put people's health at risk.

The hospital trust's leadership team says that high levels of sickness among senior hospital staff caused gaps in the rota, but I have been informed that those staff are off sick because of work-related stress that was reportedly caused by a lack of support, a toxic work culture and bullying from management. That is not good enough. Clinicians have been working desperately hard to provide quality care and have been trying to work alongside management to improve the service, but they have found management to be unsupportive. It seems that the real issue is about management and about supporting and retaining staff.

After the CQC inspection, it was up to the hospital trust to plan a clear response and to ensure safe maternity services at Yeovil hospital. Despite money apparently not being a problem, there was a lacklustre attempt at recruitment and locums were brought in. The hospital leadership team waited until the last minute to reach a decision, and closed the maternity unit with little or no consultation with staff, patients and stakeholders, such as Somerset council and MPs like me. It is an insult that the hard-working staff knew about the closure only six days before it was due to happen. Some of them were told on Teams and others found out on social media—that is not how to treat staff.

It is a disgrace that expectant parents were given such short notice and that the hospital trust did not provide them with advanced and detailed information about the temporary closure. Yeovil hospital charity has been fundraising over the last few months for the maternity unit. It had already raised £2,000 and was due to have another huge fundraiser this month. The charity does great work for the hospital, but it too was left in the dark, which is not good enough.

It is especially worrying that a decision made to protect people may put their health at risk. Many expectant parents have told me about their fears about capacity at other hospitals and about travel times to Taunton, Dorchester or Bath. Last year there were approximately 1,300 births at Yeovil hospital. Most of the patients who would have been cared for at Yeovil hospital will go to Musgrove Park in Taunton, where staff have already raised concerns about not having enough capacity to manage their own patient numbers.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this important debate. Many women in my constituency choose to give birth in Musgrove Park hospital, and with the closure at Yeovil—where, as he said, 1,200 babies are born each year—there is a grave concern about whether Taunton will have the capacity to cope. In fact, mothers across Somerset will suffer as a result of this closure.

Adam Dance: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I will come on to that point now.

In September last year, reports described Musgrove Park's maternity unit as "traumatic, super-hot and overcrowded". Measures such as extra beds are being put in place. Expecting that overstretched service safely to take on extra cases from Yeovil is not realistic and risks putting even more pressure on the hard-working staff, who are already at breaking point. I am also concerned that the staff in Dorchester and Bath will be put under serious pressure and that, despite their best efforts, services may suffer there too.

I am particularly worried about mothers who are at high risk or who may expect complications at birth. Many parents in my constituency who experienced complications during the birth of their children, such as Louise and Rob, have told me that their children are alive because of the tireless work and dedication of the team at Yeovil and that their children may not have survived if they had been forced to travel to Taunton, Dorchester or Bath, which are 45 minutes from most of my constituents on a good day. Experts have told me they are worried that emergencies such as late pregnancy

per vaginal bleeds require immediate medical attention and can cause death for mothers and babies in the worst-case scenario.

It is not just parents and paediatrics who are at risk; I am seriously concerned about the knock-on effects on Yeovil's emergency department, which will potentially put more strain on the hospital and on patient care. Sadly, other constituents who were hoping to have children have told me that they are now reconsidering because of the stress and risks posed by potentially not having proper maternity services in Yeovil.

While I appreciate that this is a local issue, trust in the hospital leadership has broken down. I believe that central Government have a duty of care to the people of Yeovil and that they can take steps to help. I ask the Minister urgently to undertake a review of the decision-making process at the Somerset NHS foundation trust on the closure of maternity services.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): My hon. Friend mentions the Somerset NHS foundation trust, which made a decision recently to reduce the number of beds and associated staff at Frome community hospital. Does he agree that those decisions really need wide consultation, allowing for boundaries and relationships with hospitals such as the RUH, as well as proper consultation with staff and the community before they are undertaken?

Adam Dance: I totally agree; it really is just not good enough. [*Interruption.*] I hope the Minister is listening.

I urge the Department of Health and Social Care to do all it can to maintain and support NHS Somerset in ensuring the return of safe maternity services to Yeovil district hospital. Just as with the closure of its hyper-acute stroke unit, many worry that this is a sign that Yeovil district hospital will be turned into a cottage hospital. As such, I also ask the Minister to join NHS Somerset integrated care board in committing to maintaining a fully functioning district general hospital in Yeovil that provides safe, high-quality and sustainable services.

However, Yeovil is not alone in this: we face a crisis in maternity services, particularly in rural areas. The CQC has raised safety concerns about a lack of training, limited engagement with communities, inadequate risk assessments and poor management and culture among senior leadership. The CQC national review of maternity services in England for 2022-24 found that 47% of maternity services were rated as requiring improvement for safety. As of May 2025, 56% of maternity units in the south-west had an overall rating of "requires improvement" or "inadequate".

Given that, can the Minister detail the Government's plans for funding and improving the provision, management and staffing of maternity services in hospital trusts that cover large rural geographies? Can she provide a timeline for implementing those plans? I again urge her and the Secretary of State to meet with hon. Members from Somerset and Dorset to further discuss this issue and to come to Yeovil and talk to those impacted by this decision.

In conclusion, the closure of Yeovil district hospital's maternity unit, initially for six months, was done for the right reasons, but it was done disgracefully. People in Yeovil are not just worried; they are scared and angry. We care deeply about supporting our fantastic NHS

[Adam Dance]

staff and the lifesaving work that they do. Hundreds of people joined me at a rally outside the hospital on the day that the maternity service closed, and many more have written to me. Nearly 6,000 people already have signed petitions calling for the safe return of Yeovil's maternity unit. We will campaign tirelessly to ensure that we can restore local maternity services in Yeovil safely. I hope that the Minister will join us in that battle, because everyone deserves access to safe, local maternity care, regardless of where they live.

7.14 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) for allowing me to speak, and I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. The closure of Yeovil special baby unit and maternity unit has shocked many of my residents across Glastonbury and Somerton, as it did my hon. Friend. After the announcement, I immediately set up a petition to gather evidence of the strength of feeling regarding these vital services. Since then, I have been inundated with responses.

I begin by echoing my hon. Friend's sentiments in thanking the staff at Yeovil for their incredible work and care. Rob from Limington, a resident in my constituency, told me that his family would not be a family without the work of Yeovil staff. That is a compelling piece of information. Somerset NHS foundation trust made the decision following a clinical assessment that services could not continue operating safely. That is a damning indictment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) on their campaign. To reinforce the point evidentially on the closure of Yeovil hospital maternity unit, the impact on the community will be great; it happened to me at Ards hospital, where GP services were overrun with the work that had to be done. Midwives complained that the impact on the community was great, and the effect was not just on the maternity unit, but on NHS services overall.

Sarah Dyke: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the impact is not just within the county, but causes a huge knock-on effect on wider services.

The decision is a damning indictment of how our health services have been treated, and how they have been run into the ground following the Conservatives' regular cuts. Residents in Glastonbury and Somerton are devastated, and are concerned that this six-month temporary closure could then become permanent. I have had many examples of residents contacting me, including Ben. He and his wife are from Martock, and are expecting their first child in September. They have planned a home birth with support from the Yeovil midwifery team. They can still access those services, but if complications arise, they will no longer be able to rely on Yeovil hospital services, which are only a 15-minute drive away. They will have to go a lot further, driving at least 45 minutes to access Taunton, Royal United hospital, Dorchester or Salisbury. There are so many unanswered questions, especially on how the closure will affect the capacity of Taunton's Musgrove Park hospital, or Dorchester or Bath's maternity units.

We need clarity now. Our residents deserve that. Will the Minister give us and our constituents that clarity, so that those who are looking forward to starting a new family or who are growing their family can know that the journey through their pregnancy will be safe and that they will have a family beyond that?

7.18 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I thank the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) for securing this important debate about the temporary closure of maternity services at Yeovil district hospital. I know, having given birth to three myself, that choosing where to give birth and the planning of that journey, as has been outlined, is incredibly important for women. We are determined that all women are given choice over their care and are listened to and supported with compassion. The hon. Member is an advocate for the Yeovil community, and I welcome his representations, ensuring that his constituents' voices are heard. That is an important role for Members of Parliament.

I will start by acknowledging the concerns that hon. Members have raised on their constituents' behalf, both in their letter and in this debate, and I hope I can update them on the relevant issues as they stand. In preparing for this debate, I have met the trust and Somerset ICB, and I am grateful for their time and briefing on these issues.

As hon. Members know, the trust cannot safely staff the paediatric service as well as the special care baby unit. This means that it has taken the difficult decision to close the special care baby unit, which also means that it cannot safely provide maternity services—I think that point was acknowledged by the hon. Member for Yeovil.

The hon. Member is concerned about the process followed by Somerset NHS foundation trust in coming to this decision, particularly about it not having consulted the local council, MPs or other stakeholders. He also identified concerns about the information going to staff. In some situations, such as this one, NHS providers may need to make a temporary service change due to a risk to the safety or welfare of patients or staff. Legislation allows them to do so without consulting the scrutiny committee beforehand, provided that that service change is needed for safety or welfare reasons. I understand that the trust briefed Somerset county council's health overview and scrutiny committee on 15 May, and has committed to further updating the committee in October. The trust has had one-to-one conversations with affected women and families to help them with alternative plans, which have been supported by Somerset Maternity and Neonatal Voices Partnership.

Adam Dance: Does the Minister agree that the timescale given to our NHS staff, and telling them on Teams or not telling them at all—with them finding out on social media—is not the right way to treat them? Imagine how that makes those staff feel.

Karin Smyth: I am not aware of the operational details of how the decision was communicated, but I am happy to come back to that. As I have said, when decisions are made for reasons of safety—which is of primary importance—sometimes staff will not be able to be consulted in the usual way. Of course, some staff

will not be working at a given time, or may be on holiday, and organisations have to take particular measures to inform staff. I appreciate that that is very disruptive and personally distressing for staff who have been working in a unit and need to know where to go, but emergency situations sometimes necessitate things not being done as robustly as might be desired.

Local leaders have assured me that this closure is not intended to be permanent—that is very important for hon. Members and their constituents to understand. The trust is committed to reviewing the position in three and six months, and following the three-month review, Somerset ICB will provide an update in September. Finally, once a decision is made, any permanent change would need to be based on clear evidence of better outcomes for patients.

On the wider issue that has been raised this evening, as hon. Members will be aware, the Government's position is that changes to NHS services should always be locally led and clinically evidenced. Any decision about the next steps for the neonatal and maternity services at Yeovil hospital should be taken by the local NHS, with support from the Care Quality Commission. I understand that work is currently under way to mitigate the impact of the closure and move towards safe operation of services. The NHS England South West regional team is working with the trust and the ICB to mitigate the risk of the closure and ensure that the wider systems work together to provide safe services. The trust is working closely with neighbouring hospitals in Bath, Salisbury, Poole, Dorchester and Exeter to ensure sufficient capacity, which should provide assurance to local people.

Regional team clinical leaders have attended a rapid quality review meeting with ICB and trust clinical leaders, and work continues on mitigating the risks that have been identified. I have been assured that Somerset ICB will monitor progress against improvement plans, formally noting any new or emerging risks and actions required. It will also be monitoring the impact on Musgrove Park maternity unit. I understand that Somerset NHS foundation trust and Somerset ICB have also written to the hon. Member for Yeovil since the closure and that there is due to be a call with local MPs tomorrow. I think that is good progress; as I said to representatives of the trust when I met them, I commend that way of operating with local Members of Parliament. I hope it is helpful in having detailed conversations locally to reassure hon. Members and—more importantly, if I may say so—their constituents at what I appreciate is a really difficult time for women who are either due to give birth, or are thinking about starting a family.

We are committed to tackling staffing challenges that the NHS faces, such as this one. For the maternity workforce, NHS England is undertaking a programme of targeted retention work for midwives. This includes a midwife retention self-assessment tool, a mentoring scheme, strengthened advice and support on pensions, and flexible retirement options.

NHS England has also invested in unit-based retention leaders, who focus on retention and give pastoral support to midwives. This initiative, alongside investment in workforce capacity, has seen a reduction in the number of vacancies and in leaver and turnover rates. Maternity care remains a top priority for providers, as is demonstrated in the planning guidance, in which the NHS was instructed to improve safety in maternity and neonatal services as a priority.

I know that there is concern in Somerset more widely about how this change will affect services in the local area. Let me reassure Members that NHS Somerset is committed to investing in local services for both hospitals there. That includes a commitment to a fully functioning district general hospital in Yeovil. The Yeovil diagnostic centre, which is due to open later this year, will be a modern, three-storey, state-of-the-art centre based at Yeovil district hospital. It will have the capacity to deliver an additional 70,000 diagnostic tests and out-patient appointments each year and to be open seven days a week, providing radiology, endoscopy and cardiology services, audiology tests and out-patient appointments.

I thank the hon. Member for Yeovil again for raising this important issue. I know that he and his colleagues will keep a close eye on progress. I hope that I have responded to his immediate concerns tonight, and I will of course write to him and other Members shortly in response to their letter of 19 May.

Sarah Dyke: May I raise the issue of maternity services at Musgrove Park hospital, which will be taking on a number of patients? An upgrade that was due has now been pushed back to the mid-2030s. At present, maternity services are provided in a 1940s dormitory-style building. Does that really show mothers-to-be that their needs are being prioritised?

Karin Smyth: I am of course aware of that, because I lead on the new hospital programme. The Government are committed to a clear timetable for the programme, which includes Musgrove Park. In our Budget last autumn, we announced decisions—which the hon. Lady and her colleagues did not support—involving capital plans and ensuring that that programme is now on a financial footing that it was not on previously.

I am confident that the local NHS is aware of the impact of this change and continues to work hard to improve the situation. Any change in NHS services must be made with the utmost sensitivity to local views, while also prioritising safety. I know that Members will continue to monitor this issue, and I will ensure that they receive a response to the letter of 19 May.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 3 June 2025

[DR ROSENA ALLIN-KHAN *in the Chair*]

Groceries Code Adjudicator

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 1 April, on Fairness in the food supply chain, HC 589; Written evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, on Fairness in the food supply chain, reported to the House on 11 March, HC 589; Correspondence from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee to the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, on Fairness in the food supply chain, reported to the House on 11 March.]

9.30 am

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

It is a delight to be here and to speak on this subject, which is of great importance to my constituents, both consumers and producers. A free economy works best when those who buy and those who sell can do so in a multiplicity of places. Nowhere is that more important than in the field of food, for food is the most basic of all commodities; we all, after all, need to eat. That variety prevailed for most of time. Indeed, if one thinks of the earliest civilisations, the way we mark them is by their trading capacity, such as those in the Levant who traded food produced there in markets between 7,000 and 10,000 years ago.

Yet in my lifetime—in all our lifetimes—the provision of food in this country has changed. It was Napoleon who described Britain as a “nation of shopkeepers”. If only that were still true. In my boyhood, my mother could shop at a variety of places to obtain the food products and other household items that she needed. What has happened during my lifetime is that a monopoly supply, or near-monopoly supply, of food provision has emerged, in the form of the great behemoths, the huge supermarkets, the corporate interests that now dominate the provision of food.

That has broken the food chain. Let us be in no doubt about where we are as a nation in respect of the provision and consumption of foodstuffs. The food chain is broken, and Governments of all colours have been reluctant to face that reality. Indeed, there has been a defence of the fact that most people now are obliged—I emphasise that: obliged—to buy their food from a handful of places, with little or no choice as to whether they do so, because, as I said, everyone has to buy and consume food. The defence offered is that it has driven prices down; but I will contest, in this short debate, that that is not really so.

Bulk buying of food, which is now the norm—most people buy their food on a weekly basis; they fill their trolley with any number of goods—does three things. First, it disguises the relationship between cost and value. In the days when people bought as they needed,

they had a pretty good idea of what things cost and whether they were providing value for money. When people fill a basket, those details are lost in bulk purchase. That allows supermarkets to produce what they call loss leaders, which are cheaper products that draw people in.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): The Groceries Code Adjudicator is of course vital, but my party and I believe that its remit is too narrow. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it is time for a new groceries code regulatory authority, with powers to introduce price floors and ceilings, ensuring fair prices for suppliers and consumers?

Sir John Hayes: I am delighted to accept the hon. Lady's advice on that. She is not, in parliamentary technical terms, my hon. Friend, but she is a friend none the less, and she is right in her assertion, which I shall move to after I entertain the House a little further with my preparation for making exactly that argument. The essence of my call today is that this Government need to take action to deal with the near-monopolistic supply of foodstuffs that our constituents are obliged—I use the word again—to endure. The best way of doing that is through a more regulated market, and she is right to say so; but let me set the scene a little more before I come to the point at which I will call for exactly what she has suggested.

As well as the loss leaders that I mentioned, which have the seductive effect on consumers of encouraging them to buy many other things, secondly, that kind of provision of food has led to a great deal of waste. From studies that have been done, we know that these days much of what people buy—as much as 20%, or perhaps a little more—is never consumed. That would have been unthinkable a couple of generations ago. People would not have believed it was possible to stock the pantry or fridge with all kinds of things that ended up on the scrapheap.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) *rose—*

Sir John Hayes: I give way to the Select Committee Chairman, to whom I pay tribute on this subject for bravely making the case that I will make today, with less expertise than his.

Mr Carmichael: The right hon. Gentleman flatters to deceive, I fear. He is right about the way grocery supermarkets go about their business, but much of the problem is the way they choose to go about it. I recently heard from a livestock farmer who bought in potatoes to feed stock. He expected to find them green, bruised or damaged, but when they arrived they were perfect; they just were not conformed to the particular specification that the supermarket demanded. That demand does not come from consumers, but directly from supermarkets. If he looks around Europe and elsewhere, the right hon. Gentleman will find that supermarkets there behave very differently.

Sir John Hayes: The right hon. Gentleman is right. That is why, when he and I were in Government together, we introduced the Groceries Code Adjudicator. He will remember that I worked closely with his colleague Vince Cable, then Secretary of State, and was involved in that

[Sir John Hayes]

decision. He is also right to focus on the producers. I have spoken so far about consumers, but I want to go on to talk, thirdly, about the distortion in respect of producers.

I began my speech by speaking about how both producers and consumers need a multiplicity of places to buy and sell. In the model that I set out, the one that prevailed for aeons, people who made and grew food, primary and secondary producers, were able to sell to a variety of places. In our lifetimes—I might be overestimating the age of some hon. Members present, but certainly in many of our lifetimes—markets existed where farmers would take their produce to auction. Indeed, there was a livestock market in Spalding in the streets until the 1930s and a covered market until the 1990s, where livestock was brought to be traded and auctioned very openly.

Producers have also been affected by this distortion. As the food chain breaks, it is not only consumers who struggle, able to go to only one or two places to get not just what they want, but what they need, because, as I said, foodstuffs are fundamental.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate on an incredibly important topic. Those of us here will express that shortly. Does he welcome, as we all should, the commitment shown by these examples? Tesco, Asda and Lidl in my constituency have an arrangement on Fridays and Saturdays to give those goods that are coming to the end of their shelf life but are still consumable to local community groups, which in turn filter them out to those who need help, the families below the poverty level. We are sometimes hard on the superstores for what they do, but we should recognise that there are occasions when they play their part.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is right. His endless good will, known in this House for some time, encourages him to emphasise that supermarkets do deal with their waste products, but inevitably, as well as the waste products that over-consumption produces, supermarkets throw away many of the things on their shelves because of sell-by dates. It is hard to get a handle on, because quite a lot of it is disguised, but supermarkets themselves are actually contributing immense amounts of food waste.

It is true that some communities have found settlements for that, in the way that the hon. Gentleman described. Some supermarkets have at least paid lip service—I say at least, because it is occasionally more than that—to redistributing some of the waste food from their shelves into communities, but we should not be gulled by that. Burke said that tyrants seldom need a pretext; this is a kind of economic tyranny. To have a circumstance in which a near cartel of supermarkets can determine the price of products and then foist them on to a consumer base that has little other option is, in commercial terms, about as tyrannical as can be imagined.

You can tell from all that, Dr Allin-Khan, that I am not a great admirer of the large retailers, and not just for the reasons I have given. I doubt, for example, that supermarkets are particularly careful—by that, I mean they are careless—about the circumstances of their

customers and employees. I am not confident that a supermarket chain has quite the sensitivity to a locality, to a community or to a group of people who become their customers and employees that a small family business has. Happily, I still have some of those small family businesses selling food in my constituency, and thank goodness for that, but their number has shrunk. The nation of shopkeepers is now a nation of very large shops, and those are corporate entities rather than the kind of shops that I imagine Napoleon had in mind. This huge problem has affected our high streets, where supermarkets have become more ubiquitous and the only grocers one can spot is a Tesco or a Sainsbury's—or perhaps an Aldi or a Lidl—rather than the variety once seen up and down our constituencies.

It has also affected producers, as I will come on to in the second part of my speech, because my constituency is disproportionately responsible for the production of UK food. Lincolnshire grows 30% of the UK's vegetables, 20% of the sugar beet, 18% of the poultry, 20% of the potatoes, and it processes 70% of the kingdom's fish. In total, my county produces 12% of all the food that fills the shops and shelves, pantries and fridges of our country. Given that, one can understand the particular concerns that farmers and growers in my constituency have about the way those big retailers treat them.

The picture I painted, of an open economy where people can sell in a variety of places, has long gone. Most of my primary producers have very few options, and therefore often have a gun put to their head by their customers, the supermarkets. That might affect their terms of trade and the prices they are offered, which is why the relationship between farm-gate prices and retail prices is, again, distorted in this broken food chain. It often involves sharper practice still, where supermarkets cancel orders quickly; even when a farmer is tooled up ready to provide goods, they will find that in the next season they no longer have a contract to do so.

In the past, supermarkets have lumped all kinds of other costs on to the supplier, such as marketing and transport costs. That is unacceptable, and it is ultimately unsustainable, as those businesses make too little profit to reinvest and therefore become less competitive. We might say, “Well, surely the supermarkets need to obtain their goods to sell them,” but we know where they then go; they import goods from countries that produce those goods at standards we cannot imagine in this country, thereby putting even more pressure on domestic producers. Do we really want that, or do we want a country that cares about food security and becomes more economically resilient because more of what we consume is made here?

A Labour Prime Minister once spoke of British jobs for British workers. He was right. We indeed want British jobs for British workers and we want British goods for British consumers, too. We need to recognise that the provision of food as locally as possible provides economic security, cements and secures communities, and shortens supply lines and therefore, apart from anything else, has immense environmental benefits by cutting food miles. That is the kind of economy that we can have, because there is nothing inevitable or pre-ordained about fewer and fewer food suppliers dominating the food chain.

I have spoken about the impact on consumers of reduced choice and the impact on producers of not being able to trade their goods fairly and freely. Now,

I shall talk about the changes we could make. In addition to the decline in income that all types of farm have suffered in the last several years—figures from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggest a sharp decline between 2023 and 2024—there is an issue with the GCA itself.

I am proud to have played a part in setting up the Groceries Code Adjudicator in 2013, but since then the GCA has conducted only two major investigations—into Tesco in 2015 and the Co-op in 2018. The GCA's power to fine retailers came into force in 2015 and applies only to breaches that occurred after that date, so it did not apply to the first of those investigations. Then, in 2018, the adjudicator said that it did not consider

“the nature and seriousness of the breaches by Co-op to merit a financial penalty.”

So although the GCA has had the power to investigate and punish retailers who breach the groceries code, for that is what the GCA oversees, it has not done so. Why is that? Where is this reluctance rooted? What has been the reason for it?

The reason is partly that those detrimentally affected by the broken food chain are reluctant to report their problems to the adjudicator. They fear they will be identified and later punished—after all, these economic tyrants have little mercy. Those affected can go nowhere else to sell their produce, so what would they do then? They literally have nowhere to go. It is also partly that the adjudicator's powers are insufficient, and that is the reason for and purpose of this debate.

I am pleased by the reports that the adjudicator is now taking a look at Amazon. As a matter of record, I have never bought anything on Amazon and never will; let me establish that before we go any further. I like to buy my goods in small shops, face to face, and meet real people. I do not want to live in the virtual world—why would we? I want to live in the real world. That investigation is good news, but I fear that, rather like the two previous investigations, it may come to nothing, merely raising false hopes of action that will not in the end be taken.

By the way, I hold in high regard the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), with whom I worked in government. Not all Liberals are as bad as they are painted—at least, not as bad as they are painted by me, that is for sure. I know, too, that the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), is a good and responsible Minister, who will be listening to this debate with care. I implore him and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore)—because the previous Government's record on this is not great either—to step up to the mark, because the present position is unsustainable and cannot continue, for we cannot perpetuate a situation where a handful of corporate giants wield disproportionate power over the provision of food, and by so doing, dictate the food security of this country. If they continue to import food at the rate they are without care, how can we be food secure?

Let me deal with the particular measures we would like to see. We need to extend the role of the adjudicator to include more retailers and food service providers, including food manufacturing businesses, because at the moment the scope is narrow. We need to find a

better way of guaranteeing the anonymity of those who bring their complaints to the adjudicator. Efforts have been made in that respect, and even at the time we set up the system we were mindful of that issue and tried to create some degree of protection for people going to the adjudicator with complaints, but I am not sure that has bedded in as well as it might have done. I know from speaking to farmers and growers in my constituency, whom I meet weekly, that that remains a fear. That is a barrier to the effective application of the adjudicator's powers.

We also need to expand the adjudicator's remit to include the ornamental sector, which is important in my constituency. Lincolnshire, particularly South Holland and The Deepings, has a thriving ornamental sector, employing a large number of people in many smaller, often family-run, businesses. They are currently outside the adjudicator's scope and should be included.

We need the adjudicator to have a role in initiating inquiries and studies, rather than simply waiting for complaints. It would be perfectly reasonable for the adjudicator, on the basis of his or her expertise to initiate inquiries into particular aspects of food provision and retailer behaviour. We want a more proactive role. When the role of Groceries Code Adjudicator was established, it was dubbed the “food ombudsman”. That was never the official title, but perhaps it ought to be. Rather than simply having a narrow remit to enforce the groceries supply code of practice, perhaps the adjudicator could have a slightly broader remit to look at the whole issue of the provision of food and its relationship with food security.

When people such as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and I began speaking about food security donkey's years ago, it was regarded as a rather arcane subject and we were seen as mildly eccentric for worrying about such things. Now, food security is a salient issue and at the top of many nations' political agenda. More than that, it has become critical to national wellbeing. What a good time this is to think more laterally about the role of the food ombudsman and how it might reinforce the Government's commitment to food security. It would be a way of delivering the objectives that the Government have set out. They said that they are keen to reinforce food security, so why not use the GCA as the means of doing so?

Doing that would allow the adjudicator to develop a strategy and to roll out a set of co-ordinated actions against unfair practices. I would include prices in that because, while all of the techniques I have briefly outlined are used to distort the relationship between buyers and sellers, prices are an issue. How can we ensure that farm-gate and retail prices are brought into closer union?

Just before Christmas last year, we had the obscene spectacle of one or two retailers bagging a series of vegetables in a plastic bag and saying, “These can be bought for 12p.” I had farmers and growers in my constituency telling me, “We have toiled hard to produce high-quality produce, only to see it being sold at a price far below the cost of production. Is it any wonder that the consumer does not appreciate the hard work that goes into making food and the quality of food grown in this country?” There has to be some means of reuniting value and cost by looking closely at the price farmers are paid and the price consumers subsequently pay.

[Sir John Hayes]

That is not to encourage food inflation, but simply to ensure that everyone gets a fair share of a bigger cake, rather than see their share be eaten up in the profits of these corporate behemoths.

By and large, I favour a capitalist economy, although I am not an unbridled admirer of capitalism. How could I be? I am a Conservative, after all. But on balance, I think it is perhaps the best of a series of faulty options. As I said at the outset, capitalism works when people can buy and sell in a multiplicity of places—circumstances that do not prevail in the UK food sector. By empowering the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which henceforth will be known as the food ombudsman, I think, we may be able to rebalance the provision of food and join again the food chain, which is so badly broken.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

9.56 am

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing today's debate and for his impassioned and articulate speech, which I very much associate myself with. I am quite staggered at how regularly our minds meet on the crisis of capitalism, although we do have different answers to it from time to time. I place on record my role as the chair of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union parliamentary group, and thank them for their extensive work on this issue over the years.

As we have heard from the right hon. Gentleman, the groceries supply code of practice and the adjudicator, despite being well intentioned, miss the mark by quite a large margin in terms of protecting those whom they were designed to protect. The code applies only to designated grocery retailers whose annual turnover is more than £1 billion. It does not apply to indirect suppliers, cover pricing or consider the protection of workers throughout the grocery supply chain; and even with its limited powers, it has not issued a single fine.

Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, agrees with the right hon. Gentleman that as a result of those deficiencies, the UK's food system is on a precarious footing. It says that most suppliers producing and processing the food that ends up on our supermarket shelves are vulnerable to unfair purchasing practices, which can send competent businesses into bankruptcy, undermine competition and lead to a worse deal for consumers. As the bakers union says, there is a limit to suppliers' ability to keep prices down through productivity increases from automation or sourcing cheaper inputs—a key factor in the horsemeat scandal. As a result, there is relentless downward pressure on labour costs, leading to attacks on the pay and conditions of workers employed in and across supply chains.

In the four weeks to 18 May, grocery price inflation has jumped to 4.1%—its highest level since February last year. Of course, the reasons for that are complex, ranging from wholesale costs, to energy and ecological

issues, all the way through to problems with the supply chain, but that does not mean that the Groceries Code Adjudicator can continue to ignore the important issue of excessive pricing. Sometimes there is a reasonable cause, beyond the control of the supermarket or supplier, but sadly, sometimes it is a result of aggressive cost cutting, asset stripping, and unsustainable leveraging strategies.

There are long-running accusations that some of the big retailers and manufacturers have been using reduced competition and market leverage to set prices and, in turn, make excessive profits. For example, in 2023 wholesale food prices started to fall, with the World Bank saying they were expected to drop by 8% by the end of the year; but those falls were not reflected on supermarket shelves for some considerable time, which led to accusations of "greedflation". Even the Tesco chairman suggested that suppliers might be at fault, telling the BBC at the time that it was "entirely possible" they were using high inflation as an excuse to raise prices unnecessarily. Of course, the major retailers and suppliers refute that, and the Competition and Markets Authority said there was nothing to find—nothing to hang their hats on—but large profits and record executive pay and shareholder payouts were juxtaposed against a backdrop of high food inflation and food insecurity.

Most people were perplexed, and rightly so. The Competition and Markets Authority might not have found widespread market abuse per se, but there remained a fundamental issue of fairness. Is it right to report bumper executive pay and shareholder dividends at times when consumers and the wider supply chain are struggling?

Last November, interestingly, the Competition and Markets Authority's second report on pricing suggested that manufacturers had been raising the cost of first infant formula milk higher than was necessary to cover inflationary costs. It was not the Groceries Code Adjudicator that instigated action. Some supermarkets themselves responded by slashing the cost of formula, but the fact is that the Groceries Code Adjudicator should have had the powers to intervene earlier and to regularly monitor price fluctuations to identify emerging issues. It should not have taken a one-off CMA investigation to uncover that unscrupulous price hike.

If the Groceries Code Adjudicator cannot investigate and robustly intervene to protect suppliers, producers or consumers when it is clear that the pricing structure of a supermarket or a major supplier pricing structure is putting the short-term interests of shareholders above the wider public interest, and if it cannot respond to emerging issues, outline measures to help families facing hunger and protect the sustainability of the UK grocery supply chain, what is the point of the Groceries Code Adjudicator?

There are a few recommendations that I have made to the Minister on which I would like an update. I hope he will take these points on board. First, a new groceries regulator authority with beefed-up powers should be established with a wider responsibility to protect the sustainability of UK suppliers and the interests of consumers. It must apply to the whole sector, not just to those with a turnover of more than £1 billion. The new regulator should be given the power to introduce price floors and ceilings to protect suppliers and consumers from aggressive pricing tactics and exploitative price

gouging. There must be an investigation across DEFRA, the Department for Business and Trade and the Competition and Markets Authority into the impact of private equity acquisitions of UK groceries retailers and manufacturers on the security and sustainability of the UK food supply chain. We must restore and extend sectoral collective bargaining for workers employed in the UK food supply chain. Finally, we must introduce a statutory right to food in UK legislation and address the root causes of insecurity.

As the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings rightly set out, consumers should not be forced to buy their goods from major retailers if they are the only retailers in town. We have to provide an economic framework that supports suppliers and producers and ensures that people enjoy a diversity of shopping experiences and diversity in pricing so that we have a sustainable UK food sector.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): Order. I will now impose an informal four-minute limit. If we run short of time, I will have to impose it formally or reduce it.

10.4 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing time for this debate from the Backbench Business Committee. I find myself in the curious position of being in violent agreement not only with him, but with the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey). That is a moment worth reflecting on.

In advance of this debate, we have received some very useful briefings from the National Farmers Union and the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union about food insecurity and workers' rights; the hon. Lady has just touched on those issues. Curiously, the one organisation from which we have not heard a peep is the Groceries Code Adjudicator itself. That is quite significant, because this is not the first time that the House has debated the work of the adjudicator: my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) secured a debate on it in February, I myself presented a ten-minute rule Bill on it in March, and now we have this debate today. If the adjudicator had a good story to tell, we would expect to have heard something from it by now, given the criticism that has been levelled at it. But not a peep: it has maintained an *omertà* that would put the Mafia to shame.

I do feel slightly conflicted. The adjudicator has a tiny office and, I think, a staff of seven or eight. Given its inability to process complaints at the moment, I do not know that I want it to spend that much time talking to MPs and policymakers. But if it has a story to tell, it needs to come out and tell it. Otherwise, we will be entitled to assume that there is not much that it can say.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings spoke about the need for reform and the way in which that reform might take shape. I disagree with very little of what he said. What we need, as the hon. Member for Salford says, is a single regulator from the farm gate to the supermarket shelves. At the moment, too many unfairnesses are hardwired into the system,

there are too many players in the market and it is just too easy for outcomes to fall between the gaps. Those who suffer are always the consumers, who are left with higher food prices, or the primary producers. At the moment, it is principally the primary producers who are losing out. The supermarkets are entering into a price war as they try to push down food price inflation. As a primary food producer myself, I declare a registered interest.

There are wider issues around the behaviour of supermarkets. There has been widespread and justifiable outrage in the past few days about Asda selling Uruguayan beef. The way it is often done is instructive. The labelling on the top looks lovely. It says that the beef is 30-day matured rib-eye steak of "heritage breed origin", whatever that means. A shopper has to turn it over and see the small print on the back or underside of the tray to find out that it is beef produced in Uruguay from cattle slaughtered in Uruguay. Even if we park for a moment the concern about animal welfare standards, the carbon consequences of shipping beef around the world in this way are utter madness, even though ironically it would help us to meet the targets set for us by the Climate Change Committee.

That example illustrates that amid growing competition among supermarkets on price, if we continue to reduce our levels of livestock in this country the resulting gap will be filled by cheaper imports. That surely renders any definition of food security utterly meaningless. Once we lose our own producers, we will not get them back.

10.9 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), as we all do, for leading the debate and setting the scene incredibly well.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator is imperative in setting out standards for fair trading between large stores and their suppliers. The right hon. Gentleman referred to doing his shopping locally. I am the same, but I know that for the generation after me—my son, my daughter-in-law and all their family—Amazon is probably their first contact. Life is changing, and it seems cheaper to do it that way.

People are becoming more interested in the food that they are eating and where it is sourced. I have been a member of the all-party parliamentary group for eggs, pigs and poultry for most of my time in Parliament. I am of a generation for whom there is no better way to start a day than with two boiled eggs. I remember the '60s—that is how old I am—when the advertisements on TV said, "Go to work on an egg." Well, I could go to work on two eggs and finish the day with two eggs as well. I am probably keeping the egg industry going just with my own purchases.

I understand the importance of the issue for the livelihoods of farmers in my constituency. The GCA's jurisdiction extends across the entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: it regulates designated retailers with an annual groceries turnover exceeding £1 billion. In Northern Ireland, the GCA's role is particularly significant. The Ulster Farmers Union—I declare an interest as a member—has highlighted the

[Jim Shannon]

GCA's importance in maintaining fair trade practices amid ever more challenging economic conditions. It believes that

"the GCA performs an essential role in a modern, sustainable and competitive grocery market in the UK."

There is no doubt that reducing or weakening the powers of the GCA will put suppliers and consumers at risk. In my constituency of Strangford, large chains such as Tesco, Asda and SPAR have contracts with numerous suppliers, and their contributions keep the sector going. I have a great relationship with many local suppliers in my constituency, including the likes of Mash Direct and Willowbrook Foods, which provide fresh potato and vegetable dishes. One example is a local farmer, Roy Lyttle—a small farmer, but a decent enough producer—who has just developed a new salad product, Lyttle Leaves. I believe it will take off.

Local farmers and butchers, such as Carnduff butchers and Colin McKee's, are incredibly popular throughout my constituency. The issue is that grocery inflation has risen to 4.1%, the highest in 15 months, and there is always a possibility that it will continue to rise. That highlights the financial pressure on suppliers and manufacturers to provide products at a competitive rate and ensure that they can make a profit with their wonderful produce.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend will know that farmers in Northern Ireland feed more than 10 million people across the United Kingdom every year. Does he agree that our farmers are treated as shock absorbers? They carry all the risk and receive the least reward. They are still being relentlessly squeezed by powerful retailers and processors. Does he therefore agree that the GCA's role needs to go further in protecting our farmers from unjust and unbalanced practices?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree. My hon. Friend's words are on record, the Minister is here, and hopefully he will respond in a positive way.

Workers have reported feeling lonely, stressed and isolated. They find it hard to connect with others; they often work alone or as part of a small workforce. They are the ones who produce the food on our farms, and they must be properly rewarded for their actions to ensure that supermarkets always have produce to sell. Unfortunately, with inflation rates, people are working harder and under more pressure, with little recognition.

The scope of the problem is highlighted by a 2025 BFAWU survey that shows that nearly 60% of food workers are not earning enough to meet all their basic needs such as rent, heating, electricity and food. Some 86% say that they have had to reduce their heating to save money. It is important in this debate to give the perspective of workers, because they are the ones doing all the real graft.

I will conclude with this point: we must look at the sustainability of the UK food supply chain and ensure that suppliers have access to large food suppliers at a decent price that reflects their work. There are calls for DEFRA here and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs back home to work together, as the GCA applies to the whole United Kingdom. We must do more to protect the collective

UK food supply. I hope that the Groceries Code Adjudicator will commit to doing so in Northern Ireland. I thank the adjudicator for doing his bit to protect the farmers and suppliers of Strangford.

10.14 am

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing this important debate. He and I discussed the matter in this very room quite recently, and I am proud to be here again to represent the people of Lichfield, Burntwood and, crucially, the farming villages of my constituency.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator regulates supermarkets and other businesses to ensure fairness in our food supply, but it does not go far enough down the supply chain—I almost said "food chain," but I am avoiding the pun. It regulates only a small number of businesses, about a dozen. While it tries to keep prices as low as reasonably possible and aims to ensure that food profits get shared fairly across the supply chain, it simply is not reaching the most important layer of the supply chain—the producers and farmers.

In almost all cases, farming is a pretty weird yet fundamental part of the UK economy, as it is the part we need to keep the country fed. Despite its importance, the sector does not always follow the economic patterns we would expect. The general rule of thumb in any free market economy is that those taking greater risks should see a greater return. They should see the value when things work well, as it is on their shoulders when things do not work well in difficult times. However, that is not always how farming works in the UK.

Farmers across the country are very much at risk of flooding, disease and drought. A huge number of potatoes are grown in my Lichfield constituency every year, and I know many farmers who were happy to see the heavens open a couple of weeks ago. Farming is a risky business. Factors well beyond a farmer's control can have a profound impact on the yield from a particular field, on the quality of what is grown, or on a hundred other things that most people will never even think about. Usually that would mean bumper profits when things go well, to reflect the need for rain, sunshine or frost at the right time, but that is not how it is currently working in the UK. Most farms are simply not making enough money.

I make it clear that I am not saying that we have had it too good for too long, and I am not arguing for higher food prices—we have just had a cost of living crisis, and I hope it is a very long time until we see another—but there is enough profit in our groceries system to make sure that everyone gets fair prices, a fair day's pay and a fair day's return.

I am sure everyone in this room believes, as I do, in a free market economy that delivers fairness for everyone, but the free market is failing farming, food producers and our groceries system. It is therefore right that legislators should step in, and it is important for the GCA to take a more active role. It is important for farmers, and especially to dairy farmers on my patch—we need to look much more closely at dairy farming.

The dairy farmers I speak to openly say that the very best contract they can reasonably expect for their milk is a "cost of production" contract, which all but guarantees

that there can never be any profit in their farming business. Some salaries will be included in the costs, but no line for profit. The result is a perverse situation in which the processors to which the milk is sold—the customers for much of my farmers’ produce—demand to see the farmers’ financials and will then tell them what it costs to produce milk. That is the antithesis of how a free market should work. There can be no situation more perverse than that.

This is really important to farmers in my constituency, who deserve a market that works in their interest; it is important to retailers, large and small, that want to do the right thing by their customers; it is important to my constituents who work in farming communities; and it is important to people living in more urban areas of my constituency, as they are also very interested in making sure that people get a fair shot in a fair economy. We need the GCA to stand up and play its role in making sure that we have a fair system for everyone.

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): A recurring theme of my conversations with farmers across North Somerset is that they have little interest in Government handouts. They want to stand on their own feet without relying on state subsidies to stay afloat. However, it seems that this aspiration can be realised only if we address that pressing issue of supermarket pricing and the power imbalance between suppliers and retailers in contract negotiations. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must revisit the groceries supply code of practice, and the Groceries Code Adjudicator that enforces it, to ensure that farmers producing high-quality British produce are paid the fair price they deserve?

Dave Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. We do not need the Government to try to run everything. We need a free market, but one that is regulated properly to deliver for producers and consumers—to deliver for everybody.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I am setting an official time limit of three minutes each.

10.19 am

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing this debate—he is right to describe the supermarkets as an “economic tyranny.” We Liberal Democrats are also concerned about concentrations of power, and there is currently no greater concentration of power in our food chain than that held by the supermarkets.

Welsh farmers face pressures on all fronts. Nineteen per cent of British sheep are in Powys. However, despite the current bout of food inflation, farm incomes are still falling. One of the biggest challenges is the simple fight for fair treatment within the agricultural supply chain. Farmers deserve to be treated fairly, which is why the Liberal Democrats championed, during the coalition years, the creation of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to tackle unacceptable practices by supermarkets that, time and again, used their size and power to squeeze local producers.

The GCA has helped to improve the situation since its launch in 2014, but farmers are still coming forward with stories of unfair treatment such as last-minute order changes, delayed payments and punitive delisting. These are David versus Goliath situations in which small producers are left shouldering huge losses, while the big retailers rack up billions in profits. Just last year, Tesco posted £2.3 billion in profit, while Asda brought in more than £1 billion, but many farmers, particularly in Wales, are barely breaking even. Studies back this up: nearly half of UK farms fear they could go out of business, and three quarters say that supermarket behaviour is a major concern.

The GCA needs more teeth. It must be able to launch its own investigations, rather than waiting for complaints. Too many farmers are scared to come forward, as they are worried about being blacklisted or dropped. The GCA’s scope also needs to be widened. Many food suppliers, such as processors and packagers, are not covered, despite playing significant roles in the supply chain. Retailers such as Amazon were added only recently, and Amazon scores extremely low on compliance. With an increasing market share of smaller, online and non-traditional grocery retailers, many of which do not come close to hitting the £1 billion a year turnover threshold to be covered by the GCA, major players are falling through the cracks.

Better funding, more staff, greater transparency and anonymous reporting tools would all make the GCA more effective. It has achieved real progress in the last decade, but if we want to protect our farmers, our food supply and the rural communities they support, the GCA must be given the power, the scope and the resources to help secure a fairer agricultural supply chain.

10.22 am

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this important debate.

The number of English farms has fallen by nearly a quarter in 20 years, with dairy farms, which are highly prominent in Somerset, hit particularly badly. We all know that British farmers have faced a long list of challenges, such as the impact of Brexit, sky-high energy prices, terrible Tory trade deals, botched transitions from the basic payment scheme to the environmental land management scheme, the shattering blow of the family farm tax and the no-notice cancellation of sustainable farming incentive grants. Now the Government seem set to make significant cuts to the nature-friendly farming budget in their upcoming spending review.

On top of all that, farmers earn tiny profits and are regularly exposed to industrial-scale exploitation by supermarkets that are focused on delivering cheap food and meeting their just-in-time supply model. Many households are living in food insecurity as a result of our unbalanced food system, and food poverty is on the rise. Food security is vital for national security, but farmers are increasingly being forced out of business as they cannot afford to make a living growing food for our tables.

I cannot stress enough how important our farmers are to national security. As Professor Tim Lang’s recent report on the UK civil food resilience gap highlights, we

[Sarah Dyke]

must act now to ensure the UK's food resilience and preparedness. We are living in a volatile and unpredictable world, and we must be ready for international shocks to food supply chains, so I urge the Minister to talk to his DEFRA colleagues, to look carefully at the damage being caused to the UK agricultural sector, and to support a system that empowers and rewards British farmers to produce high-quality food while protecting nature.

Of course, we must also address the power imbalance that farmers face on their route to market. The UK groceries sector is dominated by a handful of supermarkets, with around 95% of food sales controlled by just 10 retailers. That concentration means that supermarkets wield significant power over farmers, leaving them with very little negotiating leverage. Unethical practices from large supermarkets can lead to contracts being altered at the last minute, and supermarkets often use loss leader strategies, selling some products at a loss to attract more customers. That practice squeezes suppliers, which are often forced to accept lower prices, and if they do not meet their quotas, they will be punished.

In large part, that reflects the limited scope of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which covers too few retailers. Many farmers and suppliers fear retaliation if they report unfair practices, while two thirds of farmers report feeling fearful of being delisted if they speak out of turn about supermarket behaviour. That leaves them underpaid and vulnerable. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a change in the Groceries Code Adjudicator. It needs teeth, and it needs to be strengthened.

10.26 am

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Farmers in North Norfolk are facing a litany of struggles. They feel let down by the previous Government for selling them down the river with dodgy trade deals and years of cuts to the farming budget. They feel let down by the current Government's continued pursuit of the damaging family farm tax.

Farmers' major struggle, however, is the continued decline in the profitability of farming. That is deeply worrying not just for farmers, but for the supply chains, businesses and communities that they support. Of course, it is not just about supermarkets: larger food manufacturing suppliers, most of which have indulged in record profits throughout the cost of living crisis, have allowed shrinkflation to surge and are engaged in their own race to the bottom on many prices for British-grown ingredients.

In North Norfolk, we grow huge amounts—almost 2,000 hectares—of sugar beet. In 2023, when the National Farmers Union and British Sugar were at loggerheads on the agreement for purchasing beet, British Sugar contacted the individual farmers who would be affected by the agreement to share the terms to which it wanted them to agree. That bypassed the NFU's negotiating team, who exist to ensure that farmers are protected and get a good deal from the only buyer of sugar beet. The NFU was rightly outraged, as were many of the farmers I have spoken to. That is exactly the kind of bad behaviour by monopolistic multinationals that we need a strong regulator with teeth to protect farmers from.

I, too, want to see the adjudicator go further and act tougher. In future, I also hope that it will get involved in actively pursuing policy goals that I am sure we would all support, such as directing the market to incentivise healthier food alternatives, encouraging the consumption of whole foods, and tackling the swelling amount of ultra-processed food on our supermarket shelves, which is a cause of growing public concern. Market shaping, along with selective legal measures such as the sugar tax, is surely preferable to the nanny state telling us what we can and cannot eat.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator is an important protector to get the best deals for farmers and consumers. I am pleased that it continues in its role, but I hope it can step up in the years to come by using its powers to encourage measures so that our shelves are more fairly stocked with products that are better for our health, our farmers and our planet.

10.28 am

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I warmly congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on the manner in which he introduced the issues and perambulated around the full range of factors that are clearly having a significant impact on this country's extremely and continually marginal food production base. He went back almost to the prehistory of food production and highlighted the collective near-monopoly held by supermarkets, and the restricted opportunities for small independent food retailers in that infrastructure.

The right hon. Gentleman was perhaps echoing the words of Lord Heseltine who, when he was President of the Board of Trade, memorably said that he was prepared to intervene before breakfast, lunch and dinner—or dinner and tea, to my way of thinking. The right hon. Gentleman is of that wing of the Conservative party that believes in free markets but recognises that they need to be regulated when they go in the wrong direction, as has clearly happened in this case.

A number of interventions and comments touched on the potential of going back to retail price maintenance, which was introduced before the second world war to regulate the final price. I do not think any political party proposes that the GCA or regulation should morph into finished retail price maintenance, although it was interesting that the spectre of final prices was reflected on in the debate.

The hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) outlined the limitations of the GCA and the implied lack of teeth, a point that was echoed by many others. She called for its powers to be beefed up. My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the Chair of the EFRA Committee, made a telling point that, amid all the briefings, the GCA seems remarkably silent in offering any advice on the many debates that we have had on this issue. He also highlighted that the GCA and the groceries code do not look at primary producers but the ultimate supplier to the supermarket, because that is how the code was written.

Perhaps I need to go into some of the pre-history, and not because I am concerned that I have been airbrushed out of the history of the creation of the GCA. The late Colin Breed, the former Liberal Democrat

MP for South East Cornwall, produced a report called “Checking Out the Supermarkets” in 2000, following an investigation, which resulted in a Competition Commission inquiry. I took on his work and chaired the Grocery Market Action Group, which had members of the NFU, the Country Land and Business Association and Friends of the Earth all sitting in the same room, along with Traidcraft—I see Fiona Gooch from Traidcraft in the Public Gallery—and other organisations not normally expected to work together, because they saw a fundamental injustice in the grocery supply system. We must work together.

Further inquiries undertaken by the Competition Commission produced a report in 2007 that identified excessive risk and unexpected cost passed on from supermarkets because of their overwhelming power in the supply chain, and the impact that had on suppliers. That needed to be regulated and, hence, the groceries code was created. We campaigned and argued for the creation of the GCA as a means of policing the code. It could not simply sit on the shelf without anyone observing how the code operated.

That code was never intended to be the finished product. It was simply a framework for the Government to commence a review of how the process should operate, so the GCA should not be held in aspic for all time. I understand the Government are undertaking an inquiry covering 2022 to March 2025. I hope that review will reflect on the comments of hon. Members, the impact on primary producers and the current limitations.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) emphasised the marginal status created for many farmers. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) described the challenge of maintaining both a low retail price and a profitable supply chain. It is very difficult to get that right, but if there is fairness in the supply chain, then both can be achieved. All Members recognise that. My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) has already ably led a debate on this issue, so he is well practised. He understands these issues and brought the Welsh perspective. My hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) proposed changes to protect whistleblowers and made particular reference to those affected by the bully-boy tactics of supermarket buyers. Let us say it: that is effectively what is going on in the sector. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) emphasised similar issues affecting his area.

It is really important that the Government look carefully at areas of the GCA where improvements can be made. The framework is there; what the Liberal Democrats are asking for is that the GCA be able to instigate its own investigations. That may well be on the basis of market intelligence or whatever it may be, but it is important that it is able to instigate its own investigations, while at the same time being aware of time-wasting fishing expeditions. Nevertheless, the balance can be struck. The pressure points in the supply chain are pretty clear. That freedom must be there.

The reach of the adjudicator is far too limited. Only the ultimate supplier is reviewed according to the code. They need to be seen in the context of the full supply chain. Very often the people who are actually catching the cold and suffering the most are the primary producers, but they are not the final supplier. That needs to be reviewed, and I hope the Government will allow that change.

A number of Members mentioned the lack of resources. Whether there are seven or 10 entirely seconded members of staff, this is a really shameful situation. The adjudicator has to control very large supermarkets, and the cost of a single investigation is greater than the GCA's annual budget on many occasions. From 2013 to 2024, there were only 13 arbitrations and only two formal investigations. The GCA is rightly highly regarded and seen as efficient and effective, but with more resources will come more clout. The GCA is currently funded by a £2 million levy on the 14 supermarkets. Split 14 ways, that is only £142,857. Supermarket profits are in the hundreds of millions—indeed, billions—so it is really important that the Government review that. The Government should also be looking at sectors other than food, perhaps including the garments sector.

10.39 am

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this important debate. Who better to open this debate than a Lincolnshire representative from a county that I know very well and which produces 30% of our vegetables, 20% of our sugar beet and, collectively, 12% of all of the food that we find on our shelves?

We have heard contributions from Members from all four nations of the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. I represent the constituency of Keighley and Ilkley in God's own county of Yorkshire, and we also have many producers and growers who have a relationship with supermarkets, and have been expressing their concern to me in advance of this debate.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator is hugely important in addressing some of the systematic issues within our food supply chain that have been referenced in the debate. It was set up under the coalition Government, which my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings noted. It manages only 14 retailers, which cover a vast swathe of the food market, but that does not go far enough. Competition puts huge pressures on our suppliers and growers further down the chain, which is why it is vital that the Groceries Code Adjudicator addresses unfair practices. The questions that have been raised in this debate are those of power, funding and resource.

In 2024, a survey run by the GCA reported a reduction in the number of groceries code issues and an increase in supplier satisfaction with retailers, where issues were raised. I question that report. All Members speaking in this debate have picked up on the fear among growers and producers of being blacklisted if concerns are raised, and a reluctance to even report, because of the huge pressure that can be put on them by the retailers.

The 14 retailers included in the scope of the GCA and the code of practice cover a significant proportion of the UK market. However, it misses a number of smaller but significant retailers. That is the point I want to build on, as mentioned by other Members today. Has the Minister considered reducing the £1 billion turnover threshold that marks the point where businesses must be compliant? If that threshold were removed, many more retailers would be brought into the fold of the GCA. Members have advocated for that in today's debate.

[Robbie Moore]

The work of the GCA is important in maintaining the health of our supply chains. An unfair contract between a retailer and a producer or grower can be devastating. We have heard the points made in the debate—the challenges are huge. That can result in growers and producers being locked into unfair contracts. Orders can be cancelled unnecessarily. The Chair of the EFRA Committee, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), made a point early on in the debate about potatoes—they were of sufficient quality for any consumer to eat, and yet, because they did not meet the exact specification from the retailer, the order was not taken.

Sir John Hayes: I forgot to say what a pleasure it is to see you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. My hon. Friend identifies a fundamental issue. In commercial transactions, there is always risk, and that risk needs to be balanced. At the moment, all the risk is taken by the farmer or grower and none of the risk is absorbed by the retailer. We need to adjust that balance to ensure fairness, in the way that has been articulated by so many Members across the Chamber.

Robbie Moore: My right hon. Friend makes a valid point. At the moment, the risk is all sitting on the shoulders of the growers and producers. That is unfair, because there is a certain expectation of the food they are preparing, whether in quantity or quality, but some of the risk factors are completely out of their control, as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) noted. Those factors include weather conditions, which impact many of our farmers and growers. The lack of flexibility in the contracts is another.

That is why the GCA must have the teeth that many have talked about in this debate, because these issues go beyond the impacts of the unfair contract. At a time when pressures on our agricultural sector are mounting, additional budgetary pressures were announced by the Government in last year's Budget. The hike in employer's national insurance, the family farm tax, which has created a huge amount of uncertainty, the cuts to the sustainable farming incentives, and the drastic reduction in the delinked payments to a cap of £7,200 are all additional cash-flow pressures, exposing our farmers and growers to long-term uncertainty, beyond the challenges associated with the contracts they are entering into with retailers.

While the GCA has made hugely important steps, many producers and growers are still unaware of its role and powers. There is absolutely more work to be done within the industry to build awareness and trust of the GCA and its powers, and that is exactly what the nub of this debate is about. We know that pressures are mounting on the agricultural supply chains that run right the way through the system, from farm to fork. One of the shortcomings of the GCA in its current set-up is that it only handles the relationship between the retailer, the supplier and some farmers and growers, missing out many farmers, growers and other intermediaries in the supply chain. That has to be addressed, as has been referenced by many Members in their contributions.

That has to be addressed if we want to restore a level of trust in the system, and work to do so has been started. The Fair Dealing Obligations (Milk) Regulations 2024

were introduced recently, which have a specific focus on milk, and regulations for other products are on their way. But I ask the Minister: what are we doing to address this disjointed approach? It seems that multiple regulators are managing different elements of the supply chain, which is creating more friction and uncertainty for businesses.

The experience of the last decade shows the growing case for better lines of communication between the GCA, DEFRA and the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator. What conversations has the Minister, in his role representing the Department, had with DEFRA and the GCA? That was a point made by the Chair of the EFRA Committee, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland; I congratulate him on the work he did in introducing his ten-minute rule Bill, which had the support of the Opposition.

Going forward, I hope that the Government will be able to pick up where the last Government left off and not only expand on the fair dealing regulations, but tie in the GCA and its operation to the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator, providing a joined-up approach to the full supply chain. Although I welcome the increasing scope of regulatory framework on the agricultural supply chain, does the Minister plan to include other products, such as ornamentals, as part of an expanded GCA remit? Ornamentals, like food, are perishable and suffer with the same challenges that many Members have outlined in this debate.

What are the Government's intentions when it comes to increasing the GCA's powers, funding, resource and people power, so that it has the ability to enact the requests of both sides of this House? I reiterate that trust absolutely needs to be restored into the system, which can only be done by re-establishing better supply chain relationships throughout the system. That relies on giving the GCA more power, more finance and better lines of communication with DEFRA and the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this important debate, and on the sweeping historical nature of his opening comments, which gave us a broad view of the importance of agriculture and food in the development of civilisation. Of course, we are talking about more contemporary issues, which he went on to address, and I will respond to some of his comments in my remarks.

This is an appropriate time for the House to discuss the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator because, as Members will be aware, we are currently undertaking the fourth review of the GCA's effectiveness, as required by the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013. The statutory review will consider how the GCA's powers have been exercised and how effective the GCA has been in enforcing the groceries supply code of practice. It will also consider whether the existing permitted maximum financial penalty for non-compliance following an investigation is appropriate and whether there should be any restriction on the information that the GCA may consider when deciding whether to investigate.

On the question of financial penalties, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings referred to two investigations where no fines were issued. However, it is worth stating for the record that, following the Tesco investigation, it was charged £1 million by the GCA for the cost of that investigation, and the Co-op investigation led to a charge by the GCA of £1.3 million for the cost of it, plus compensation to suppliers of £650,000. But it is noted that the GCA has not been issuing fines. I think that is part of its overall approach to try to get compliance rather than issuing fines, but that is something that Members can respond to as part of the review.

Mr Carmichael: The difficulty is that the review of a limited regulator is always going to bring up a limited answer. What we need is something much more holistic. Just to take one small example, the number of small abattoirs in the country is now down to the hundreds, from 2,500 some time ago. That is a direct consequence of the way in which the supermarkets bring pressure to bear in other parts of the supply chain, so what we need is something that looks at the whole process, from farm gate to supermarket shelf.

Justin Madders: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. Of course, the review is dictated by the legislation that his party was, in government, involved in introducing, so part of the problem is where we are with the statutory framework, but I do take his wider point that clearly there are a number of different developments in how we deal with the overall agricultural food supply market; the GCA is just one part of it. The other developments, which Members have talked about, particularly in terms of ASCA, probably need to be looked at more holistically than is the case at the moment.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to the Minister for that remark, but the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is right: the important thing is co-ordination. The previous Government did a good job in establishing the basis for the “fair dealing” obligations, but it is really important that the work being done—outside the Minister’s Department in some cases—is co-ordinated, and the Groceries Code Adjudicator, in exactly the way that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland suggested, has a purview that extends across the whole process. I hope the Minister will give a commitment to that now.

Justin Madders: I acknowledge the wider points that have been made. Members have raised today a number of issues that are beyond the scope of the Groceries Code Adjudicator and clearly are within the bailiwick of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which clearly I need to work with on developing a more holistic approach. That is one of the challenges we face, because the code regulates only designated retailers’ dealings with their direct suppliers and currently applies to the 14 largest grocery retailers in the UK, each with an annual turnover of £1 billion or more.

A number of Members referred to the threshold and questioned whether that is currently appropriate. It is worth pointing out that, according to the marketing data company Kantar, the 10 largest retailers covered by the groceries code amount to 97% of the grocery retail market, although the adjudicator has said that he

is happy to hear views on whether the threshold should change and about suppliers’ experiences of dealing with retailers not currently covered by the code. The adjudicator has also said that he will pass on any relevant information to the CMA to inform future decisions on retailer designations under the code. There is therefore an opportunity for Members to feed in if they feel there are particular retailers under the current threshold that should be included.

A number of Members talked about the issue of price. The code does not regulate the prices agreed between retailers and suppliers. It does, however, require these negotiations to be conducted fairly and transparently, and the GCA is keen to ensure that negotiations around cost price pressures do not lead to non-compliance with the code. In 2022, the GCA published the seven golden rules to remind retailers of best practice when agreeing to prices.

Sarah Dyke: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Madders: I have quite a bit to get through, so if the hon. Lady does not mind, I will carry on.

The statutory review is focused on the powers and duties of the GCA as set out in the 2013 Act and the 2015 order. These powers include providing arbitration between suppliers and retailers, conducting investigations into retailers suspected of breaching the code, and enforcement powers where the adjudicator is satisfied that a retailer has broken the code. Enforcement can take the form of the adjudicator making recommendations against the retailer, requiring retailers to publish details of the breach, or imposing financial penalties of up to 1% of the retailer’s turnover. The adjudicator also publishes advice, guidance and best practice statements, and can make recommendations to the CMA about suggested changes to the groceries code.

Contrary to a common misconception, which I am afraid has been repeated by a number of Members today, the adjudicator does not need to wait for a complaint to be made before launching an investigation. What the Act requires is that the adjudicator has reasonable grounds to suspect that a retailer designated under the code has broken it or failed to follow a recommendation following a previous investigation. It is for the adjudicator to determine how to use those powers, but it is absolutely possible for it to pursue investigations without a formal complaint being made.

I heard a number of Members making reference to concerns about reprisals—that was also raised in the previous debate. As part of the review, I am keen to hear how we ensure that the system is robust enough, so that people in the chain covered by the code feel confident that they can raise complaints. Clearly, there will always be an element of concern when someone raises their head above the parapet, but it is possible to raise concerns confidentially. Indeed, the survey undertaken by the adjudicator is done on a confidential basis. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), referenced his scepticism about the high level of satisfaction in that. I note his comments, but it is the case that the survey is taken confidentially. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings also raised the question of anonymity. I am genuinely interested to hear from Members how we can find a way ahead so as to ensure that people can raise complaints confidentially and with confidence.

[Justin Madders]

In general, the adjudicator has ensured a collaborative approach with suppliers, which has helped to prevent problems from escalating and reduced the need for time-consuming and expensive formal dispute resolution. A number of Members raised the question of resourcing, but it is for the adjudicator to set the level of the levy that is applied. That is always a matter of discussion, but I am sure that if the adjudicator wished to increase the levy, it would be able to do so within the powers it already has.

I am conscious that I need to give the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings an opportunity to respond. I have not addressed all the points that Members raised in the debate, but where I am able to provide a further response, I will write to those Members. I would encourage all Members to engage with the review. It is important that a number of the issues that we have heard about today are fed into it.

10.59 am

Sir John Hayes: With that pledge that I can continue to communicate with the Minister, I am delighted to thank all colleagues who contributed to this debate. It is perfectly possible to feed the nation at a fair price without fuelling the excessive profits of greedy plutocrats. To do that, we need to extend the power of the adjudicator in the way that has been set out by a considerable number of Members from across the House. It is vitally important the food chain is relinked, to make sure that all those involved in the production, distribution and sale of food can act in a way that is commercially viable but fair. It is not fair now.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Leasehold Reform

11 am

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I will call Ruth Cadbury to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

11.1 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered leasehold reform.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. This is a well-subscribed debate, but as it is only half an hour I have said that just a couple of hon. Members can intervene, and hon. Members understand that we are not accepting any speeches apart from mine and the Minister's.

It is a pleasure to lead this debate on leasehold reform in England and Wales, one of many that I have already spoken in during this Parliament. I want to start by thanking the dozens of constituents who have written to me in the last week to let me know about the problems they have faced: high service charges, rising building insurance, safety problems, unclear management contracts and a wall of silence from their management companies and freeholders. Most of those issues have been raised with me by leaseholders in my constituency since I was first elected to this place 10 years ago.

The common theme, as hon. Members know, is a lack of control. Many leaseholders assume, when they sign their contracts, that they are moving into a home. They have to pay a service charge, but they expect that to mean that communal problems will be fixed and they will be able to get on with their lives. Sadly, that is not the case.

Many leaseholders are trapped in a complex, legalistic maze. I want to cover three things today: the situation for my constituents, how we got here, and how the Government are working to fix it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate, which I spoke to her about beforehand. Does she agree that issues with developers and management company rates can stem from the fact that the new homebuyers are often not informed about the nature of the leasehold agreements and the additional costs that come off the back of that for labour and materials? Does she therefore agree that estate agents and solicitors must have a duty of care to ensure that prospective owners are under no illusions as to how management companies and associated fees will be dealt with annually?

Ruth Cadbury: I am grateful to the hon. Member, because I was going to come on to that and to the insidious links between those selling the flats, particularly the developers, and the solicitors who they recommend to the buyers—often first-time buyers who are unaware of the challenges.

On how we got here, the answer, to be blunt, is greed. Hedge funds, investors, solicitors and developers—many based overseas—started meeting up at conferences about 15 or so years ago to learn how to use the weaknesses in English freehold law to fatten the golden goose. Members can see my rant on this subject on the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership website. Leasehold blocks of flats, often in urban areas, were valuable properties that guaranteed an extremely high return.

In one current case a freeholder called Oakdene, which is refusing to pay to fix fire safety faults, sent me a letter from a solicitor at a rather high-priced legal firm—the letter alone probably cost hundreds.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I have been working with some residents in Cavalier Way in Wincanton. They contributed £40,000 annually to Plymouth Block Management, their previous leasehold management company, which did not complete any repairs and deposited no reserves as it was transferred to the new company. The residents now have a 500% increase in their charges. Does the hon. Member agree that companies must be accountable to residents and mandated to hold annual general meetings to ensure financial transparency?

Ruth Cadbury: A lack of transparency is a theme that comes up again and again, particularly for the people who are effectively the victims. I will press on because I want to get to the end of my speech if I can.

The complex state of leasehold means that many different parties have realised that they can fatten the goose with ease, and often without scrutiny and enforcement as the hon. Member has said. First, that was often done through ground rent. Properties would often charge a ground rent of between £250 and £1,000 a year in London. I would call it money for old rope, but that would insult old rope.

That tactic was later replaced as more buyers and solicitors became aware of it, particularly around the sale of flats, so we then saw service charges being used as the new cash cow. A typical building in my constituency, which is often a flat built since 2000, has a service charge of £6,000, but some have charges as high as £7,000 or £8,000 without anything like that value of service being delivered.

For too long, it has been possible to raise service charges without limit—often vastly above inflation and with no clear breakdown. Leaseholders will buy a property and think that the service charge is paying for services such as—to take examples from my constituency—the post room, receptionist, home cinema, car park and security. In fact, they find that the post room and the home cinema are closed, the receptionist is not full time, the car park gets flooded and the security is non-existent.

If a person bought such a product on the open market, trading standards would have a field day—but leasehold is not a fair market. If we invented this market system now with its wide cast of cowboys and profit strippers, it would appear like something out of a Victorian novel. Ted Heath called it the “unacceptable face of capitalism”, but that is how we have got here.

I will not regale the House with the efforts to tame and reform leasehold over the past decade. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, I know that many hon. Members

have been working on it. The previous Government’s changes were welcome, and MPs from both sides of the House have stood up, spoken and acted, particularly thanks to the support of the APPG and the work of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and the National Leasehold Campaign. I know that the Minister gets this issue and knows it inside out too.

I want to talk about my constituents’ experiences. For many people in west London, the high cost of property means that buying a house is out of reach, but people on good salaries can, just about, afford a flat for upwards of £500,000.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this incredibly important debate. One of the issues in my constituency, which is very similar to hers, is that people are buying new flats or houses under the freehold system, but with so many covenants involved that they are also being charged the sort of service charges that she has mentioned. Does she agree that whatever the Government do—I welcome the good approaches in this place—they must also cover some of the covenant issues around freehold?

Ruth Cadbury: I agree with the right hon. Member. There are so many issues that the Government have been looking at, and are going to have to look at, particularly to ensure against unintended consequences.

With prices of upwards of half a million, even with the help of the bank of mum and dad, many of my constituents have no choice but to buy a leasehold flat, even when they have a good income and perhaps help with the deposit. That means that a whole generation in London risks getting trapped as leaseholders.

The key problem is that at first the terms can seem straightforward. A person pays their mortgage and then they pay their service charge and ground rent, and for the first year, it might be okay. They might notice some problems in the communal area, but the real kicker comes when they get the first increase in their service charge. I have seen constituents whose service charge has increased by 50% or even 100%.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that when we talk about leasehold we have to include fleecehold as well? In Priory Vale and St Andrews in my constituency, residents pay astronomical fees without receiving the services that they should receive for such fleecehold charges.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Again and again, bills for service charges come in that are not properly itemised. There are items that do not actually exist, such as landscaping maintenance, and there is a refusal to open up. Some leaseholders are even getting charged by solicitors for what should be a right.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that such service charges are an outrage? There should be some form of guarantee associated with what services are in fact provided. I, too, have had many constituents complain to me about the complete lack of services that they pay for. As she says, if those services were something that was being paid for on the open market, trading standards officers would be involved.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure that the Minister is noting these points and will address how we can ensure transparency and a minimum quality of standards in the billing of service charges and the other activities of management companies.

I now want to get to the end of my speech. Given the popularity—sadly—of this debate, I hope that there will be many more debates on it in this place where everybody will be able to make a strong speech about these issues that are so important to many of our constituents.

I will give some examples from constituents. In one case, a constituent was rightly concerned about the costs they faced and asked for a breakdown of them, but was refused. They issued the necessary legal action to get the breakdown, but six months later they are still waiting for it. There is also the specific problem that many constituents are frankly outgunned when they get into legal disputes. Another constituent faces a legal bill in the thousands because they have to represent themselves.

One Hounslow resident who lives in a badly converted office block summarises the issue well:

“Our building’s service charges and insurance costs average just over £2,000 per flat annually”—

which sounds all right—

“yet the quality of service is alarmingly poor. We have regular incidents of theft, with leaseholders having to rely on personal security measures”.

They say that is because the management company are not interested. They continue:

“The service charges increase each year with little transparency, covering inflated management fees, audit fees, and security charges, with no consultation with leaseholders on providers or costs. This imbalance of control leaves us vulnerable to arbitrary charges without accountability.”

On top of ever-rising service charges, many people have also faced sky-high building insurance costs since the Grenfell tragedy. In one case, council leaseholders saw an increase in their costs of more than 500%. People who get the right to manage by setting up resident management organisations have the right to hire and fire managing agents, and to get rid of companies such as FirstPort, but that has not always been plain sailing. I hope that the Minister will address the issue of minimum standards for managing agents when he responds to this debate.

When my constituents try to sell their flats, they often find out the major problems with leasehold: either the asking price has decreased due to the ground rent or service charges or—even worse—banks will not lend on their flats. When one of my constituents inherited a property, they found out that there was only 40 years left on the lease. They can extend the lease, but they have been told that doing so would cost a six-figure sum. They told me that

“the only future I can see is that of a bleak one.”

Another constituent wrote to tell me how, despite paying a record-high service charge, their lift is constantly broken down. At one point, excrement fell from a broken pipe through the lift shaft for a rather long time. I will leave Members to picture that scene.

Another problem was raised by the resident of the converted office block who I quoted earlier. They said that

“we have faced significant distress from ongoing attempts by our building’s freeholder to add two additional floors to our development. While Hounslow Council initially rejected the application due to objections raised by the leaseholders,”

the decision was overturned on appeal. That was on the basis that the project was

“aligning with wider housing targets, but disregarding the wellbeing and concerns of existing leaseholders. This decision now leaves us anticipating extensive disruption, with no realistic recourse or meaningful consultation. Put a little more colloquially, imagine if some UK millionaire had the right to build two additional storeys above your home!”

Many local residents are trapped and unable to sell their homes because of the web that leasehold has left them in. I hope the Minister can address that, as I know that the Government are working on it. Whether it is capping ground rent, reforming service charges or making lease extensions easier and cheaper, we need to fix the blockage for those trying to sell.

There are also problems for those who bought via Help to Buy. I have heard that the single provider that runs the service is still very slow in responding about valuations and about the other hoops that those who used Help to Buy have to go through when selling their property.

Finally, I will move on to the Government reforms. I am proud that it is a Labour Government who have promised to end leasehold. However, I know that it cannot be done overnight. How is the Minister’s Department ensuring that fire safety reforms and leasehold issues go hand in hand? Constituents tell me that fire safety remediation work at developers’ cost via the developers’ building safety pledge is being done only to the mortgage lenders’ B1 standard, rather than the A standards delivered when using the Government’s building safety fund. The former not only pay high higher insurance charges but, if selling, do so at a massive discount, thus creating one of the two-tier splits in leasehold housing.

That touches on another two-tier system that many leaseholders are worried about. The Government rightly plan to end new leasehold ownership, but what will happen to the 5 million existing leaseholders when that change happens? Will they get any retrospective benefit? In London, the gap between house and flat prices is already increasing rapidly, and I fear that we risk leaving many of my constituents with an asset that they cannot sell.

The Government rightly have an ambitious housing target, and I want us to build more affordable homes. I am, however, worried that in London we will see more homes being built that are purely shared ownership, where the tenant-leaseholder part rents and part owns the flat but is liable for 100% of the costs. I am extremely sceptical of that business model as I have seen example after example where shared ownership looks attractive, but the service charge rockets, the rents surge and, when people try to staircase up or even sell, they face many problems. Shared ownership has a role, although I suggest that the name is a tad misleading. Can the Minister outline how the Government will ensure that the new homes being built do not simply create a new generation of trapped leaseholders?

In conclusion, our leasehold system is an antique relic. It has left 5 million people trapped and now they are unsure of their future.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this debate, on the case that she made and on the passion with which she spoke. This degree of turnout is uncommon for a half-hour debate, which shows the strength of feeling on this matter across the UK. Anybody writing legal letters to my hon. Friend with the idea that it might stop her using her platform to advocate for her constituents is likely to be deeply disappointed. Nevertheless, the debate has reinforced the case for major reform of the leasehold system. My hon. Friend highlighted the broad range of issues faced by leaseholders every day. We are committed as a Government to honouring the commitments made in our manifesto and to doing what is necessary to bring the feudal leasehold system to an end.

I will cover the legislation as it is, how we are going to commence those provisions, legislation that we committed to in the King's Speech and, hopefully, some other elements at the end. We heard from my hon. Friend and other colleagues that there are unfair and unreasonable practices that require urgent relief. As my hon. Friend said, the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, with the cross-party support that it garnered, provides scope for some of that relief. In November, the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), made a statement on the next steps for leasehold and commonhold reform that set out our intended sequencing for bringing those provisions of the Act into force, including an extensive programme of secondary legislation and consultation.

The parts of the Act that can be implemented quickly have been implemented. A number of provisions relating to rent charge arrears, building safety legal costs and the work of professional insolvency practitioners came into force in July 2024. In October, we commenced further building safety measures. In January, we commenced provisions to remove the two-year qualifying rule in relation to enfranchisement and leasehold extensions. In March, we switched on the right-to-manage provisions, which allow for expanding access, reforming costs and voting rights. Some things in the Act require secondary legislation, and we have been able to turn them on.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I welcome the early pace that the Government have shown on this, but given the urgency of the issues that the leasehold scandal is causing for my constituents and those of many hon. Members, does the Minister agree that we need to bring forward further, more substantive solutions at pace, including answers for existing leaseholders, to ensure that we are doing justice to the urgency of this moment?

Alex Norris: I do. I appreciate that there is frustration about consultation, but some of the challenges within the Act show why it is important that we get this right, and that we have a process that delivers the relief that people are so desperately waiting for. One such consultation that has now concluded is around insurance commissions, which relates to service charges. We are consulting on how to replace that with a fairer and more transparent permitted insurance fee.

This year, we will also start the consultation on relevant measures related to service charges and litigation costs more generally. On new consumer protection provisions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) mentioned, for the up to 1.75 million homes on private and mixed-tenure housing estates that are subject to estate charges, we will bring the measures into force as soon as possible once we have the correct model.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the interest that he has shown in the issues we have in Stockton North at Queensgate, Willow Sage Court and Wynyard. I am pleased to provide the update to the Minister that, following my intervention, in Queensgate we now have 98% of the roads completed. Does he agree that the issue here is a lack of consumer choice? There is a market failure; in local areas such as Stockton, people who want to buy a house have very limited opportunity to do so without entering into one of these agreements.

Alex Norris: I commend my hon. Friend for his work there; it will be of great succour to a number of his constituents. However, he is right, because this is a confluence a failure to build enough houses and a system that has been left to govern itself and act in the ways that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth set out, leaving people with no choice but to enter into arrangements that lead to them having to live with these long-term consequences. That is why we must build more houses and address those behaviours.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that part of ensuring that we can take more control and offer more choice to residents is allowing residents to take greater control for themselves and, in the process, ensure better value for the services that they need on their estates?

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree, and I will turn to that in a second.

We will also be consulting on the valuation rates used to calculate the cost of enfranchisement premiums, and would welcome hon. and right hon. Members' views on that. However, there are some deficiencies in the Act that need to be rectified in primary legislation, so we do need to legislate. That gives us the opportunity to bring forward, in line with what hon. Members have said, a new era of commonhold being the default tenure for new flats.

That is why we committed in the King's Speech to a leasehold and commonhold reform Bill. It is part of our commitment to bring the feudal leasehold system to an end. We have committed to publishing draft legislation on this in the second half of the year. It will make commonhold the default, and it began with the publication of the White Paper in March. Alongside that, in response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth about the 5 million leaseholders, we want to make the conversion process easier. Once commonhold comes back into public prominence as a model, I think it will be more popular, but we want it to be easier as well.

We want to reform the existing system by legislating to tackle unregulated and unaffordable ground rents, as was mentioned, to remove the disproportionate and

[Alex Norris]

draconian threat of forfeiture, to act to protect leasehold from poor service from managing agents, as many have said, and to enact the remaining Law Commission recommendations on enfranchisement and the right to manage. We will address private estate management in that.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his work for my constituents. I am sure that he will sympathise with the latest victim to have been in touch with me. He said that with an unsellable and unmortgageable flat, due to the charges that the Minister has mentioned, he is now on the verge of bankruptcy. Does the Minister agree that real change for leaseholders is now beyond urgent, and can he assure us that this year, residents will see not only legislation but real change?

Alex Norris: I absolutely can. My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for buildings in Southampton. We are meeting later to discuss one of them. I assure him, and those residents, that we know that they need change and relief now. That is why we have made the changes that we have been able to make so far. We want to get the changes right so that when the relief comes, it sticks, does not get mired and has the right impact. However, we appreciate the urgency with which my hon. Friend speaks.

Several hon. Members have mentioned service charges and managing agents. Service charges have become a particular pinch point, highlighted by the cost of living pressures in recent years. The LAFRA gives us measures to increase transparency and to remove barriers that prevent leaseholders from challenging them, including more standardised information. However, this year, we will consult on the Act's provisions on service charges and litigation costs so that we can bring them into force as quickly as possible.

We will also consult on reforms to the section 20 major works procedure, which landlords must follow when leaseholders receive big bills for large works, as has been mentioned in the debate. There is much more to do in that area.

On the subject of managing agents, I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth that we have heard her call about minimum standards.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): My constituents have been defrauded by Initiative Property Management, are suffering at the hands of Scanlans Limited, and have had to deal with the Residential Management Group, representatives of which I am meeting later today. I welcome this Labour Government's action to hold companies such as those accountable, to challenge unfair charges and hidden fees, and to end leasehold. What is the Government's message to rogue management

companies? I ask so that when I meet the Residential Management Group, I can convey the will of the Government.

Alex Norris: I am keen to say clearly from the Front Bench that we will legislate in this area to close the dark corners that unscrupulous managing agents use to maximise profits. However, they do not have to wait for that in order to do the right thing. They have a duty to residents. There are many great examples of managing agents and landlords doing the right things by their residents. That is good for them, their building and the individuals who live there. They can do that today. I know that my hon. Friend will continue his work until they do so.

That brings me to an important point that was raised both by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East and by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth when she opened the debate, about the regulation of managing agents. They play an important role, particularly in multi-occupancy buildings, and that role is likely to increase in importance as commonhold becomes the default tenure. Many provide a good service, but there are too many examples like those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East. I know that all hon. Members here could tell me about similar examples. In 2018, the previous Government committed to regulating the sector. The report came back from Lord Best and they did not respond to it. We are looking at it closely and we will set out our position in due course. However, we have said that as a minimum, we will include mandatory professional qualifications for managing agents, to ensure that they have the skills that they need to carry out their role to a high standard.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth mentioned building safety and fire, which are part of my brief. As a Government, we understand that as part of our remediation acceleration plan, we need to give clarity about what a remediated standard is. I have talked to insurers about it, including about what they are asking for. The cladding safety scandal is being addressed through remediation. That cannot lead to a half a dozen other issues for leaseholders. We are pushing industry in that area, but we have been asked for certainty and we will deliver it.

There has been a lot to consider in this debate, and it could easily go on for another hour, which I think would be important. However, I know that colleagues will not let the matter lie. The subject is frequently on Parliament's agenda, and rightly so. There are people living under intolerable strain. We are committed, as a Government, to giving them relief as quickly as possible, and in a way that sticks. I will be working on it with my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth and colleagues over the coming weeks and months.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Animal Welfare in Farming

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant document: e-petition 706302, End the use of cages and crates for all farmed animals.*]

3.1 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I beg to move,

That this House has considered animal welfare standards in farming.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate to give a voice to the voiceless here in Parliament.

The treatment of farm animals in the UK is a reflection of our values as a society, yet millions of animals endure lives of confinement, pain and neglect. I am proud to have convened this debate on an issue that has been very close to my heart since I was old enough to understand: animal welfare. The debate could not be more timely, with a number of grotesque infringements of legal and accepted norms exposed in recent undercover footage. From the mistreatment of piglets to the rampant impunity found in a few of Scotland's salmon farms, shocking incidents have rightly caused public outrage.

However, we must be clear: these are sadly not isolated incidents, but a symptom of policy and enforcement failings in our food and farming systems. The way we treat farmed animals is not only the biggest animal protection issue we face here in the UK, but deeply entwined with the climate crisis, nature loss and the viability of our food systems. It speaks to a moral failing, a disconnection from the suffering hidden behind supermarket shelves. Ultimately, we need a food system that recognises the need to reduce demand, raise legal baselines and support better farming systems.

I am pleased to note that today's debate has been linked to the petition titled "End the use of cages and crates for all farmed animals", which has now surpassed 100,000 signatures and calls on the UK Government to "ban all cages for laying hens as soon as possible"

and to extend the ban to all cages and crates "for all farmed animals", including farrowing crates for sows, individual calf pens and cages for birds. Despite the ban on barren battery cages in 2012, about 10.6 million hens—28% of the UK laying flock—are still confined in so-called enriched cages, which severely restrict natural behaviours such as wing flapping, perching and dust bathing, and contribute to frustration, bone weakness and chronic protection issues.

I congratulate the petition sponsor, Dame Joanna Lumley, and commend her courage and compassion. Her lifelong dedication to humanitarian and environmental causes is matched in this case by her powerful advocacy for animals, who cannot speak for themselves. I also want to recognise the tireless work of the many non-governmental organisations, including Compassion in World Farming, the Humane League, World Animal Protection, FOUR PAWS and others, represented in the Chamber today, that have been campaigning for decades to end the cruelty of cages, crates and inhumane farming systems. Thanks to their persistence, these issues are finally being heard in Parliament with the seriousness they deserve.

However, accountability is woefully lacking. Prosecutions for animal welfare violations in farming are extremely rare. Between 2011 and 2021, only 28 such prosecutions were brought—fewer than three per year, despite tens of thousands of inspections and numerous breaches. The regulatory system is led by the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which is under-resourced and overly reliant on industry self-reporting. We need independent inspections and meaningful penalties for breaches.

Many people believe that labels such as "Red Tractor" or "RSPCA Assured" guarantee good welfare, and consumers want to trust that such schemes deliver in good faith. It is the Government's job to ensure that those labels mean something. Sadly, far too often that is not the case, as we have seen from many investigations on certified farms that still use crates, cages and other cruel practices.

One such practice that must be urgently reviewed is the use of farrowing crates on pig farms. A recent poll commissioned by Humane World for Animals found that 73% of people in the UK had either never heard of farrowing crates or knew very little about them—a stark reminder of how this suffering is hidden from the public eye. Yet in the UK, approximately 50% of sows are confined in these small metal cages, which prevent them from turning around or expressing natural maternal behaviours. Compassion in World Farming describes farrowing as among the most extreme forms of confinement. Pigs are widely regarded to be highly sentient animals, but they are forced to give birth and nurse their young while virtually immobilised. The European Union has committed to phasing out cages for all farmed animals by 2027, but a recent letter from the National Pig Association suggested another 20 years of suffering to phase them out.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have already indicated this to you, Mr Vickers, but I apologise to colleagues now for the fact that I will have to leave before the end of the debate, which is why I will not make a speech—a constituent is coming to see me, and the votes in the House have screwed up the timing.

The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to learn that I entirely share his view; I guess that probably everyone who will speak in this debate does. One of the supposed advantages of our leaving the European Union was that we would be able to control what came into the country in the form of food. It would be quite wrong, would it not, if, while seeking to drive up animal welfare standards in this country, we disadvantaged our own farmers and at the same time allowed into the country products from other countries where those standards are lower? Therefore, does he agree with me—I am the patron of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation—that we need to call upon the Minister to ensure that that does not happen, and that our farmers are not disadvantaged while we improve our standards?

Adrian Ramsay: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I always enjoy hearing his thoughtful remarks and strongly agree with his words today, which show the cross-party concerns on this issue; I will come on to the issue of international trade later on.

On the issue of farrowing crates, I urge the Minister to set out a clear and swift timetable for the banning of farrowing crates; I hope he will address that issue specifically in his remarks at the end of the debate.

[Adrian Ramsay]

We must also speak to the plight of broiler chickens, which are the animals most intensively farmed in the UK today. Around 90% of chickens reared for meat in the UK—nearly 1 billion animals per year—are fast-growing breeds, often referred to as “Frankenchickens”. These birds have been selectively bred to grow up to 400% faster than chickens did in the 1950s, reaching slaughter weight in just 35 to 40 days. To put that in perspective, if a human baby grew at the same rate, they would weigh nearly 300 kg—the size of a fully grown tiger—by the time they were two months old.

Such rapid growth causes immense suffering, including chronic lameness, organ failure, respiratory problems and open burns, as these chickens spend their final days lying in their own waste, often with broken bones, too heavy to stand. That cannot be right and I hope the Minister directly addresses that point as well. There are alternatives—slower-growing breeds, with significantly improved protection outcomes—but without Government leadership, market incentives will continue to favour the cheapest and cruellest options.

On the subject of pigs and chickens, many campaigners will have rejoiced at the rejection of a new mega-farm at Methwold in Norfolk; I know the hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) was heavily involved in campaigning against it. The sheer scale of the Methwold proposal was staggering—up to 870,000 chickens and 14,000 pigs, confined in barren indoor sheds. Chickens would have been packed into high-intensity units, with barely any space to move, no access to daylight and no environmental enrichment. Animal protection groups raised serious concerns about the dangerously low staff-to-animal ratio, which would have made it almost impossible to monitor suffering or to intervene in time.

Methwold is not an isolated case. There are many applications around the country, including a growing number in my constituency, for new or expanded intensive livestock units. That is deeply worrying for constituents, who are concerned not only about animal protection, but about air and water pollution, odour, and the long-term impact on communities and our countryside. The proposed Cranswick farm at Methwold was rightly opposed by the local council because of its cumulative environmental risks and wider ecological impact.

We should not be pursuing this model of farming, yet World Wide Fund and AGtivist.agency report that the number of US-style megafarms in the UK has increased by 21% in about a decade. That is going in the wrong direction, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how the Government will address it.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that, through the Government’s programme of planning reform, we must not create any loopholes that could be exploited to facilitate the destructive, large-scale farming operations that he refers to?

Adrian Ramsay: I strongly agree. As we all closely scrutinise the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, we need to look carefully at whether loopholes are creeping in that will allow horrific developments such as more mega-farms to happen at a greater scale.

Mega-farms are bad for animals, bad for nature and bad for people, and not at all necessary for food security—that is a key point. The UK already meets 100% of its

recommended protein needs, so these mega-farms are surely being developed with exports in mind. UK pigmeat exports have grown by 4% in the past year, driven by increased shipments to China. Methwold was a line in the sand, a signal that local communities will not accept industrial so-called farming that sacrifices everything for profit. To stop its unchecked proliferation, we need the Government to put their own line in the sand and say, clearly, that this must stop.

To pick up on the point made by the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), as we debate domestic welfare standards, we must also remain vigilant about how international trade could undermine them. Since leaving the European Union, the UK’s rating in the World Animal Protection index has been downgraded, reflecting growing concern that our historical leadership on animal protection is under threat. In upcoming trade deals with the US, India and the Gulf, there is a real risk that our markets will be opened to products produced in systems that would be illegal in the UK.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need to undertake a strategic review of UK border controls to ensure that UK food security is protected from the introduction of diseases such as foot and mouth, as we have had on the continent, or any other exotic disease?

Adrian Ramsay: I agree with the hon. Lady, who speaks with first-hand experience of the farming sector.

Around 6 million breeding sows in the US are confined in gestation crates, which are banned in the UK. More than 70% of laying hens are still kept in barren battery cages. US beef can be produced using growth-promoting hormones, and antibiotic use in livestock is up to five times higher than in the UK. Such practices not only cause immense suffering, but undermine our farmers and our food safety standards. That is why we must commit to banning imports produced to standards that would not comply with those in the UK. We must also defend the hard-won ban on live animal exports, a recent step forward that must not be weakened under trade pressure. Our values do not end at our borders, and neither should the protections that we afford to animals.

Let us not forget that cruelty is not limited to land-based farming. Investigations by Compassion in World Farming and others have exposed horrific conditions in offshore salmon farms. Our high-end salmon from romanticised Scottish fish farms often has deeply unpalatable origins: salmon are cramped into cages where they suffer from lice, disease and injury, mortality rates are shockingly high and immense pollution pours into once-pristine marine environments, threatening wild fish populations. The farms are intensive by design, prioritising scale and profit over animal protection and environmental sustainability. We need a moratorium on new intensive aquaculture permits and a rapid transition to higher-protection, lower-impact systems. I hope the Minister will address that point in his response.

That brings me to the last substantive area that I want to discuss before concluding: the less-visible consequence of industrial farming. Due to cramped and unhygienic conditions, disease outbreaks are controlled with routine antibiotics, but evidence shows that that fuels antimicrobial resistance in consumers and presents

a dire global health risk. The World Health Organisation has warned that antibiotic resistance could become a bigger killer than cancer by 2050, and farming practices are fuelling that trajectory.

Animal protection in farming is not a niche concern, but a public health issue, a climate issue, a biodiversity issue and a moral issue. Polling consistently shows strong public support for ending cages, crates and other cruel practices, which are unnecessarily barbaric, tragically wasteful and entirely avoidable. The public are ahead of the Government on this issue: more than 80% support a ban on cages for laying hens. The number of Members here shows the force of support for legislation to catch up.

This debate is about system change, not demonising farmers. We must bring farmers with us through clarity, fair incentives and certainty about the direction of travel. They should be supported to make adjustments on their farms, which is another reason why I strongly defend the preservation of the environmental land management schemes' animal protection grants, and I urge the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to commit to that being a core part of the sustainable farming incentive, not an add-on. The Welsh Government's animal health and welfare framework sets out the admirably worthy ambition that all animals should have a good life, even if a short one.

As we look ahead, I urge the Minister to recognise that real leadership on animal protection requires action on multiple fronts, including banning farrowing crates and cages, mandating method of production labelling to inform consumers, and strengthening enforcement through higher penalties, independent inspections and proper resourcing. It means defending our domestic standards in international trade and ensuring that imports produced using sow stalls, barren battery cages or hormone-treated beef are not waved through in deals that betray British values. Above all, we must confront the fact that more than 70% of farmed animals in the UK are reared in intensive conditions. That is not sustainable, ethical or inevitable.

The Government should set procurement targets to reduce meat from industrial systems, promote more plant-rich diets and reward farmers who are working with, not against, nature. In aquaculture too, we need environmental impact assessments, legal protection at slaughter, mandatory CCTV and protection standards equal to those for land animals. Those are not radical demands; they are practical, evidence-based steps towards a kinder, fairer and more resilient system that reflects the compassion of the public, supports responsible farmers and enhances the UK's position as a global leader in animal protection.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate, which, due to the delayed start, will now conclude at 4.31 pm, subject to there being no further Divisions. We will start with a four-minute time limit on speeches, which may have to drop if there are many interventions.

3.18 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I want to focus on import standards, which the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) began to talk about.

Farmers in my constituency of North West Cambridgeshire play by the rules and abide by the regulations. For example, since 1999 they have stopped using sow stalls because UK law rightly declared those cramped conditions cruel. But every day, when my constituents go to local supermarkets, the shelves are stocked with bacon from overseas farms that still use those banned methods. I think everyone agrees that that is unfair both for animal welfare and for our farmers.

The recent weeks have been historic for British trade. The Government secured groundbreaking agreements that will boost our economy while, crucially, remaining firm on our higher food standards. When we negotiated with the US, we held the line on hormone-treated beef, delivering on our manifesto promise to protect farmers and consumers alike. This is Labour in action, proving we can expand trade without compromising our values.

We now need to address the inconsistency still visible on supermarket shelves across Britain. Nearly 50% of pork imports come from countries where pregnant pigs remain confined in narrow sow stalls, unable even to turn around. Lamb imports from Australia, where farmers practise mulesing—cutting skin from live sheep without pain relief—have surged following the Conservatives' flawed trade deal. Such practices were banned here because they do not align with British values or public opinion.

British farmers follow our welfare regulations—no battery cages, no sow stalls and humane transport conditions—yet we continue to allow imports that undermine those standards. Instead of preventing cruelty to farmed animals, the effect of many of our laws is to simply offshore that cruelty to other countries, sometimes those with standards far lower than our own. Imports should meet our domestic animal welfare standards. If certain practices are too cruel for our farms, they should also be too cruel for our borders.

We already have a precedent for this approach—for example, current UK legislation requires that all meat imports comply with our slaughter standards. We now need to extend that principle to how animals are kept throughout their lives, not just how they are killed. That would mean legislation requiring that imported animal products meet UK standards on key welfare issues, which means no eggs from barren battery cages, no pork from farms using sow stalls and no lamb from farms practising live lamb cutting.

The European Union is already moving in that direction, with proposals to end caged farming by 2027 and extend that rule to imports. Aligning our policies would improve our trade relationship with our largest partner, further benefiting British farmers. That change would directly improve animal welfare, aligning both with our values and with public demands. For our farmers, it would right a wrong, preventing grossly unfair competition from low-welfare imports and allowing British producers to uphold higher standards while remaining competitive. That would also complement the £5 billion support package we have already delivered in that space.

That is also what the British public want: recent polling has shown that around 84% of people, including a significant backing among rural communities, support applying our animal welfare standards to all imports. The policy is not controversial at all, and it is fair for

[Sam Carling]

farmers, animals and people. It builds on the trade successes that we have already achieved while closing a loophole that undermines our farmers and our values.

Alongside our trade successes, it is time to show that our approach to trade is both principled and practical. We can grow our economy while standing firm on the standards that matter to British people. I hope that the Government will consider some legislative interventions on this issue.

3.22 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I commend the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) for setting the scene so well. He mentioned some graphic things that get under many people's skin. I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union, although we do not farm the land any more—the neighbours do that for us.

To illustrate the matter, I will say what my neighbours do in relation to it. The people I know who farm close to me—and many others too; it is not exclusive to where I live—love their animals. They have a commitment to their beef and dairy cattle and to their sheep. Last year, or perhaps the year before, they got a robotic dairy. For those who do not know what that means—I did not really know until I visited—the cattle are much calmer and they have access to food every time they want it.

Usually when you walk through a field of cattle, they scatter in all directions. I walked into those cattle along with the boys who own the farm and the cattle did not even budge out of the road. There was music going in the background as well—I cannot remember whether it was Tchaikovsky, Elvis Presley or whatever—and the cattle seemed incredibly calm. Was that their choice of music? I am not sure that they had any input into that, but they were the best looked-after cattle that I have seen for some time. The farmers that I see strive hard to do it right. I know the hon. Gentleman recognises that, but others do not, so it is important to say it.

I want to comment on the dreadful Windsor framework. Issues arose recently and the Ulster Farmers' Union expressed serious concerns about the implications of the recently announced UK-US trade agreement. In other words: we keep the standards and do things right, but then they are going to produce some stuff in the USA where they do not have the same standards that we have. There will be a serious impact on our livestock and high standards. The Ulster Farmers' Union president, William Irvine, said

"This is not a traditional free trade agreement and we recognise that it is an early-stage framework. But the fact remains—UK agriculture, including sensitive sectors like beef and cereals, is again being asked to shoulder the burden of securing trade wins for steel, aluminium and cars. That sets a worrying precedent."

It also sets a worrying precedent for our standards, which I am very concerned about, but unfortunately I do not have the time that it needs to go into it.

US beef is produced on a scale and in a system that gives it a cost advantage. If the UK Government open the door further, we must be ready to protect our standards to ensure a level playing field. On the bioethanol element of the deal, Mr Irvine said that the Ulster

Farmers' Union will be seeking urgent clarity from the Government on the expected impact on Northern Ireland's arable sector. In a conversation before the debate started, my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) referred to bovine TB.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Bovine TB across the UK is not just a farming issue, but an animal welfare one, and is causing a financial crisis. Thousands of healthy cattle are being culled and wildlife remains trapped in a vicious cycle of infection. The cost to the public purse in Northern Ireland is now sitting at £60 million a year. In England, there has been a science-led approach. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Northern Ireland Agriculture Minister needs to engage with England and do exactly as has been done here, with a wildlife intervention project that culls badgers, so that we improve animal health and protect our wildlife?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is wise in her intervention. In fairness to the Minister, he regularly visits Northern Ireland. We have had been fortunate to have him twice at Colin McKee's in my constituency, because he loves the scones and the coffee. He also loves seeing how a farmer can look after his animals better than others. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the issue of bovine TB, and perhaps the Minister could tell us if he has had engagements, correspondence and discussions with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Farmers' Union is calling for the UK Government to provide greater transparency about how sensitive sectors will be protected in future. It is important to get that right. Northern Ireland farmers are proud to produce food to world-leading high standards of animal welfare, traceability and environmental care, but those standards must be reflected in trade deals. We should not be held to an example of European overreach. The effect of the US trade deal may be another example of how the special circumstances in Northern Ireland are especially difficult rather than especially beneficial.

There must be standards in place for animal welfare, and we must remove the EU overreach and have UK-wide standards. I ask the Minister to take that back to the Cabinet. We must all do better to support farmers in the same way throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe the Minister does that and I look forward to his response.

3.27 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) for enabling us to speak on this important topic.

I will start by sharing how valuable it was to spend a day of last week's recess at Staffordshire's county show. As always, I came away full of admiration for our farming community. I am a little biased, but Staffordshire is a shining example of some of the best of British farming, and everybody at the show seemed to agree. That is not just in terms of productivity and innovation but in the deep care many of our farmers have for animal welfare.

That brings me to the complex and often uncomfortable balance we are trying to strike in this debate between raising animal welfare standards and the environmental, financial and logistical realities of making that happen.

When we talk about moving away from practices such as caged systems—a move that, for the record, I absolutely support—we are also talking about the need for more barn space, more land use and more infrastructure, all of which mean higher running costs for farmers and sometimes greater greenhouse gas emissions.

To be clear, those are not reasons for rejecting higher animal welfare standards, but they are reasons to approach the issue with farmers in mind. That must be our starting point, because farmers are not charities and, more than ever, they have to look at the bottom line, which all too often is dwindling. Let us be frank: supermarkets will always demand higher welfare, but they are not always willing to pay more for it. That is disingenuous to consumers and squeezes producers even further, pitting welfare against farm viability.

An area where we could make a real difference is animal welfare labelling, which is being looked at by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I am a member; I am glad that the Committee's Chair is present. For the average shopper, labelling is a minefield. Information on nutrition and the country of origin has been simplified in the past decade, but in the animal welfare space we have statutory minimum standards and the "Red Tractor", "RSPCA Assured", EU organic and Soil Association organic labels, all representing different standards.

Consumers need to understand what labelling means in practical terms and how to interpret it when they shop. That will not be easy, but I believe that is a challenge that we can and should take on. However, in doing so, we must make sure producers have a say, alongside consumers and animal welfare organisations, so that they can realise the benefits of clearer labelling too. The lack of coherent and clear information on welfare on the shelf is a concern for farmers who are producing to higher standards because they do not have a clear way of differentiating their products for consumers. They therefore do not reap the rewards from the quality of their goods that should incentivise higher welfare standards. Research indicates that the current systems of farm assurance, regardless of the label, are not working as best as they could for farmers, consumers and, most importantly, animals.

Sir Roger Gale: I agree with the hon. Gentleman entirely. Does he also agree that there is a significant error in not properly labelling animals subjected to non-stunned slaughter?

Josh Newbury: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I think that that is a perfect example of where stronger, more consistent animal welfare labelling would give consumers that kind of information. In other countries, such as Germany, systems take that into account, and consumers should have access to that information.

On farm assurance, for example, the campaign group Animal Rising has uncovered failings in "RSPCA Assured" farms and abattoirs.

We also have to ensure that fairness for the farming sector is paramount. I raised that in Select Committee sessions and it has been raised today, but it bears repeating: we cannot ask our farmers to invest in higher standards and then leave them exposed to undercutting by imports. We are all in favour of better welfare. In fact, a 2022 poll revealed that 71% of the British public

want the Government to pass more laws to improve animal welfare, but we cannot hold our farmers to a gold standard while turning a blind eye to imports that are produced to far lower standards. Trade deals without adequate safeguards will negatively impact the UK's animal welfare standards for decades to come, undermining our farmers and the hard-won animal welfare improvements that we need to build on. That risks putting more farmers out of business, jeopardising our food security and offshoring animal cruelty.

To put it simply, if it is too cruel to produce here, it should be too cruel to import. If it is not good enough for our farms, it is not good enough for our shelves. Ultimately, we need to get the balance right by supporting our farmers to raise standards, making sure that consumers understand what they are buying and ensuring that the whole system—domestic or international—reflects our values as a nation of animal lovers.

3.32 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers.

Britain has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. We should take real pride in that, but we must also protect it, both for the sake of the animals in our care and the farmers who work hard to uphold those standards every single day. Pride alone is not enough. If we want consumers, both at home and abroad, to understand and support the standards we have set, we must clearly communicate them. That is why I would strongly support the introduction of a standardised mandatory animal welfare labelling scheme on meat, eggs and dairy—not voluntary but mandatory. Such a scheme would allow shoppers to make informed choices about the products they buy and to support British farmers, who uphold some of the highest standards in the world. Data from the Labour Animal Welfare Society suggests such a scheme could boost profits for British farmers by over £40 million per year, and improve the welfare of up to 110 million chickens, 700,000 hens and half a million pigs annually. That is not a marginal improvement; it is transformational.

While we rightly lift our own standards, we must ensure farmers are not undercut by imports produced in inhumane conditions abroad that would be illegal here in the UK. Our farmers are proud to meet high standards, but they should not be punished for having to compete against cheap imports raised in low-cost, low-welfare conditions abroad. Phasing out low-welfare imports within five years and requiring all imported food to meet our domestic standards would level the playing field for British farmers and end the silent support of animal cruelty abroad, which I know many of our constituents have contacted us all about over the years. Humane slaughter rules already apply to meat imports—as we have heard—so why should welfare standards afforded to animals during their time on the farm be any different? That is not protectionism; it is moral leadership. As one of the world's largest economies, and with a particularly large amount of our food imported, we must use our influence and privileged position to encourage others to rise to our standards.

Across the North sea, Denmark has already launched an animal welfare labelling scheme, and we have its eight years of experience to draw on. Under the slogan,

[Sadik Al-Hassan]

“A hold on your heart”, that welfare labelling scheme has seen knowledge of animal welfare conditions skyrocket among the populace and has led to a profound change in shopping habits for the better, for consumers and animals alike.

Animal welfare is not a niche concern. According to a poll conducted by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board last year, 84% of shoppers think animal welfare is important, yet they are currently given little information about the standards involved in the products they buy.

Labour has pledged to boost animal welfare in a generation. Let us make good on that promise while shoring up the competitiveness of our struggling farmers. By introducing animal welfare labelling, we can reward those who work hard to treat animals well. We can empower consumers to reject low-welfare imports and encourage countries that wish to access our large and lucrative market to rise to our standards—a win for all.

3.35 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers.

Much of what I was going to say has already been raised, so I will make just a few brief points, because I care deeply about this subject. First, I should declare an interest: right after the debate, I am hosting an event in the Jubilee Room with Humane World for Animals about ending the use of cruel mother pig cages. At the event, there will be a life-sized replica of a farrowing crate to show just how confined mother pigs are when they are kept in them for weeks and weeks. I encourage hon. Members to come along.

As we have heard, every year in the UK 200,000 sows are confined in farrowing crates. Those sows can spend almost a quarter of their adult lives in crates where they do not even have enough room to turn around. That is unacceptable. The vast majority of Scots care as deeply about this issue as I do. When polled earlier this year, 84% of Scots said that farrowing crates should be banned, either immediately or at least within the next five years. I know that the Government are looking carefully at the issue, alongside ending the use of enriched cages for hens, and I very much welcome that. It is important to be aware that around 8 million laying hens live their lives in tiny and cramped cages, in what must be a somewhat miserable existence followed by, ultimately, a sad death.

I think most of us here would agree that Britain is a nation of animal lovers, and that we should be proud of the many high animal welfare standards that we currently have. In fact, 95% of the UK's 88 trading partners have lower animal welfare standards than our own domestic requirements, and we have heard quite a lot about that already. For example, over half of UK pork comes from countries that have sow stalls, which, as we have heard, have been banned in the UK since 1999. UK sheep production is at a 39-year low while Australian imports surge; we heard about that earlier.

Phasing out low animal welfare imports that do not meet our own animal welfare standards is urgently required. Additionally, mandatory animal welfare labelling—for example, of eggs, chicken and pork—could help

consumers make more informed choices. We have heard about that already. DEFRA proposed a mandatory method of production welfare label in a public consultation that closed in March 2024, and I think the discussion so far today suggests people would like that to go ahead.

Another area that has not been raised yet is that of male chicks. In the UK, between 40 million and 45 million male chicks each year are culled in a process called “hatch and dispatch,” as they cannot lay eggs or be grown for meat. Sometimes chicks are crushed with rollers or minced with blades while they are fully conscious. However, in France and Germany, this practice is banned. In-ovo sexing technology allows the sex of the egg to be identified before the chick can feel pain and it is estimated that implementing this technology in the UK would add less than the cost of 1p per egg. That is definitely worth considering; there is a whole lot to consider today.

Finally, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) for introducing the debate. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on all the points and ideas that have been raised so far.

3.39 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) for securing this important debate. The Welsh Liberal Democrats have always championed the highest standards in animal welfare, not just because it is the right thing to do but because it reflects the compassion and integrity of our society.

Our Welsh farmers take pride in producing food to some of the highest welfare standards in the world. However, that proud tradition is under threat—not from our own farmers but from the last Conservative Government's careless approach to trade. Take the UK-Australia free trade agreement: that deal, which was rushed through, without proper scrutiny, allowed tariff-free imports of beef and lamb from Australia, despite serious concerns about the farming practices there. In Australia, about 40% of beef cattle are reared in intensive feed lots in barren, crowded environments, where animals are fattened on grain, not pasture. Those conditions would be unthinkable here in the UK. Even worse, growth-promoting hormones are still used in Australian beef production, a practice banned in the UK for decades. Meanwhile, the painful mutilation of sheep through mulesing remains common; again, that is something we rightly prohibit here. Let us not also forget that Australian hens can still be confined to barren battery cages, which are long banned in the UK and across the EU.

Those double standards are indefensible. Our farmers are being undercut by products that would be illegal to produce here. That is not just unfair; it is a betrayal of Welsh farmers, of animal welfare and of the trust of the British public. Polling consistently shows that the British people support stronger laws on animal welfare and oppose low-welfare imports. In Wales, where our agricultural communities are close-knit and values-driven, the issue matters deeply. That is why the UK Government must act to ensure that if it is too cruel to produce in the UK, it is too cruel to import.

We are calling on the UK Government to ban cages and crates for farmed animals, to require all imported meat, eggs and dairy to meet UK welfare standards, and to introduce clear, mandatory labelling so that consumers can make informed, ethical choices. All new trade deals should be put to a vote in Parliament, and we should ensure that they are all subject to impact assessments across every nation and region of the UK. We have a moral duty to protect the welfare of our animals, and to ensure that our farmers are rewarded, not punished, for doing the right thing.

3.42 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay), my constituency neighbour, for securing this much-needed and timely debate. It is one that I called for in the Chamber several weeks ago, so I am pleased to be here today.

There was recently outrage and shock about footage from a Lincolnshire farm, where the abuse of animals was caught on film. I was glad that supermarkets took a stand, suspended their trade with that farm and confirmed that they regard such abuse as unacceptable. However, it is particularly saddening and concerning that that was not a one-off case or an outlier. Sadly, we see such animal abuse time and again at various locations across the country, including in my own county of Norfolk.

It has been made clear today that animal welfare comes in various forms, from imports to labelling and intensive farming, a subject I am passionate about. It is clear that we need to rethink animal welfare policy, and intensive farming is a particular concern for me. Freedom of information requests that I have submitted to the Environment Agency have shown that in the past decade, industrial farms have breached regulations more than 7,000 times. That is 7,000 breaches of regulations in less than a decade. It is clear that the whole regulatory system is currently completely toothless. For example, one farm operated by a large corporation has been found to be stocking more than 400,000 animals, instead of the permitted 357,000. Evidence suggests that regulatory nonconformity is the norm, yet regulators are taking enforcement action only in a tiny minority of cases. Rather than feeling the pressure to comply, intensive livestock companies are being invited to wield significant influence over public policy.

Intensive farming practices are on the rise. Between 2016 and 2023, there was a 20% increase in the number of intensive livestock units in the UK. Now, about 80% of broiler chickens are reared in fully housed, intensive systems. A process of consolidation and industrialisation of farming has seen more than 100,000 livestock and poultry farms go out of business between 1990 and 2016. It is no wonder that so many small farms in my constituency are nervous about speaking out against the big boys.

The Minister might be pleased to know that I did not intend to mention the Methwold mega-farm today. However, seeing as it was mentioned by the hon. Member for Waveney Valley, I will bring it up. I am delighted that it was rejected due to what was very much a joint effort among local residents, charities and elected representatives, from councillors to myself, as an MP.

It is true that it was rejected in part over animal welfare concerns, but importantly, the effect on the environment and climate played a role as well. In Norfolk, the environment is crucial to our economy. It is suggested that if I am against intensive farming I am anti-growth, but tourism is worth more to us in Norfolk than it is in Cornwall; it is crucial to local jobs. Intensive farming impacts jobs in our county—

3.45 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.58 pm

On resuming—

[SIR JOHN HAYES *in the Chair*]

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): As a result of the Division in the House, the debate's revised end time is 4.44 pm. I will call the shadow Minister and the Minister to wind up at 4.06 pm. I know that we have two speakers to come and that Terry Jermy is coming to the conclusion of his speech.

Terry Jermy: Unfortunately, Sir John, you have missed the first 80% of my speech. I was coming on to how crucial the environment in Norfolk is to the local economy and the threat that intensive livestock farming poses to the environment. It is also a threat from a disease and an animal welfare point of view.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): On the subject of disease, the 2023 national risk register states that the emergence of antimicrobial resistance and the presence of exotic diseases, such as foot and mouth disease, represent a threat to our food sustainability. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming calls from the National Farmers Union for the Treasury to fund a cross-Government plan to tackle such diseases?

Terry Jermy: I absolutely support that proposal. Intensive farming presents a significant risk from a disease point of view, so we need to heed such calls.

I will quickly conclude. Next year will be the 20th anniversary of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, introduced under the previous Labour Government. Last year, I was very proud to stand on a manifesto to further strengthen animal welfare legislation. As we have heard today, frankly, that cannot happen quickly enough.

In my constituency, farming is our lifeblood, as is the environment, and therefore we must have a serious conversation about what sort of farming we want in future. I sincerely hope that it is one that protects our communities, our agriculture and our nature, while also furthering our animal welfare standards.

4 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John, and I thank the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) for securing this debate.

Around one third of my constituency is agricultural land, so it is no surprise that animal welfare in farming is a big issue for many of my constituents, as it is for me. As the Minister and the Shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), no doubt remember,

[*Olivia Blake*]

we had long debates in Committee in the previous Parliament on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. Although that Bill had its faults, it would have been a step in the right direction. Sadly, it was unceremoniously dropped by the last Government after the Committee stage, which stalled progress on these issues.

I know that the Minister has picked up on these issues since being re-elected, and I was proud to stand on a Labour manifesto that made clear commitments to improve animal welfare. These are not fringe concerns; they reflect the values of people across the country who want to see animals treated with decency and respect. Animal welfare must be at the heart of farming, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because people deserve to know where their food is produced and that it is produced to standards that they can trust.

We have photographs on cigarette packets that show the harms of smoking. If we had similar images that showed the harms caused to animals by the ways in which they are kept, I imagine that the sales of the products we are discussing today would fall through the floor. The reality is that many animals are still kept in conditions that fall far short of the general public's expectations. Hens are confined to cages that, as we have heard, are barely larger than an A4 piece of paper, and pigs are kept in farrowing crates and are unable even to turn around. These are not isolated cases; they are widespread practices that cause real suffering.

Animals kept in such systems experience chronic stress, frustration and pain. That is not just outdated; it is indefensible. The science is clear and the public are clear that we must legislate to ban cages in farming, and without delay if possible. We also need to support farmers through that transition. Many farmers are already doing the right thing, often at financial cost. They deserve a system that rewards higher welfare standards, not one that pits them against cheaper, lower standard imports. I know the Minister will agree with that.

This issue is not about choosing between farming and welfare; it is about recognising that the two must go hand in hand. A fair and sustainable food system depends on both.

4.3 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) on securing this debate.

I last spoke about eggs in a debate just before Easter, but eggs are not just for Easter; they are for all year round. As other hon. Members have already said, we are still in a situation where the space that many hens have to live in is the same size as a piece of A4 paper. That is just not good enough. Such cages are known as "enriched cages". The marketing people really earned their stripes that day, because I think that if we started calling them "confinement cages" we would go a long way towards stamping out this horrible practice.

I am very keen to hear from the Minister about the recent EU reset, because some of our European friends and neighbours already have better standards than us; indeed, some of them, for example Germany, are thinking

of introducing even higher standards. Does that mean that there is now a real need for us to catch up? I would be keen to hear the Minister's views.

I am also concerned about the welfare of lobsters—the first time that lobsters have got a mention today. I did a bit of googling last night and found out that it is possible to buy fresh lobsters on the open market. The advertisement that I saw said:

"Upon receipt of delivery, store your live lobsters in the fridge until ready to cook. Lobsters can be boiled, poached, grilled or barbecued."

Imagine that referred to any other kind of animal. Imagine saying, "A live chicken or lamb will arrive; put it in the garden and then, as an amateur, smash its skull in and boil it alive." Is that the kind of situation that we want to see, in a country that talks about being a nation of animal lovers? I would be keen to hear from the Minister whether that is something that he wants to get his claws into.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): We are moving ahead with alacrity, and I am grateful to all hon. Members for allowing us to do so. Without more ado, I call Sarah Dyke, the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

4.5 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair today, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) on securing this important debate. It is also a pleasure to speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats.

Glastonbury and Somerton is synonymous with farming. I have spoken many times about how Thomas Hardy described Blackmore vale, where I call home, as the "Vale of Little Dairies". My connection with farming runs deep, so I know that farmers have a deep and complex bond with the animals they rear, shaped by the daily care, emotional attachment and professional responsibilities they have towards them. Farmers form concerned attachment for individual animals and feel empathy, even though the animals are part of their livelihood.

Hundreds of farming businesses in Glastonbury and Somerton take great pride in the high animal welfare standards they implement. Take the Slow Farming Company near Castle Cary, for example: it produces beef, pork and eggs to the highest welfare standards, as certified by A Greener World, and recognises the value of doing so not just for the animals that are reared, but for human health. This weekend, the Slow Farming Company is hosting an open farm weekend to celebrate Open Farm Sunday and showcase the concept of slow farming and slow food.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to improving standards of animal health and welfare in agriculture. We know not only that it is important to support British farmers to implement such measures, but that we must not punish farmers by importing animal products with low welfare standards from abroad. Given the Government's flurry of recent trade deals, this is an opportune time to remember why we must continue to keep high animal welfare standards at home and must not allow the Government to offshore poor animal welfare practices.

The new report from Animal Policy International, Compassion in World Farming and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals notes that 95% of potential UK trading partners have lower animal welfare standards. The Liberal Democrats are aware of the threat that new trade deals could pose, and there is the ongoing risk that the deals will further undermine British farmers by allowing in animal products that simply would not be produced in the UK, such as foie gras and food produced with antibiotic growth promoters. We are clear that we must not allow that to happen. The Liberal Democrats want to ensure that all imported food meets UK standards for health and welfare, while introducing robust food labelling that is simple to understand. That is paramount, because maintaining high food standards supports environmental sustainability and public trust in farming practices.

Last month, the Government announced a trade deal with the US. The deal included £180 million-worth of beef, and UK tariff exemptions on US beef expanded from historical levels of 1,000 tonnes to 13,000 tonnes. At the time, many right hon. and hon. Members demanded reassurance that British farmers would not be undercut by the deal. Although the sanitary and phytosanitary aspect of the deal is in line with UK standards, animal welfare concerns remain because US beef is produced to lower standards.

Last week, I attended the Royal Bath and West show and spent a morning with the National Farmers Union, speaking to local farmers. We were all horrified to learn that Asda is now stocking Uruguayan beef under labelling that could be described, at best, as misleading. I am not suggesting that the meat is of a lower standard, but it calls into question the wonderful work that Asda is doing on sustainability in its beef supply chain and in supporting British farmers, including the work it does to make UK suppliers jump through various sustainability hoops.

World Animal Protection has given the US an animal protection index rating of E for protecting animals used in farming, highlighting the stark contrast between the UK and the US. Therefore, as further details of the agreement are finalised, it is critical that the Government ensure that US—or any—beef entering the UK has been produced not only to equivalent food safety standards, but to animal welfare standards. Not to do so would be a betrayal of British farmers and the British public. Some 84% of the British public support restricting or banning low-welfare imports that do not meet UK standards. As a country, we are proud to support our farmers, who produce food for our tables to the highest animal welfare standards in the world, so we must make sure we do not kowtow to foreign Governments who want us to open the floodgates and fill our supermarket shelves with low-welfare animal produce. We must not stand by and expect our farmers to compete on an unlevel playing field. The Liberal Democrats are clear: we must instead lead the way to raise standards around the world, while continuing to raise them at home.

The previous Conservative Government signed trade deals that undercut our farmers. The CPTPP agreement—the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—could allow Mexican farmers who use battery-cage production to export to Britain large numbers of eggs produced in a manner that would be illegal in the UK. A former Environment Secretary

criticised the free trade agreement with Australia that he helped to secure, stating that the deal was not good for the UK and

“gave away far too much”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

We must not let that happen again.

The recent EU-UK agreement is a positive step in beginning to reverse the damage caused by the Conservatives’ deal with Europe and so was welcomed by the Liberal Democrats. We are committed to deepening our trading relationship with the EU and called for a comprehensive veterinary and sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. However, half the pork sold in the UK comes from countries that permit sow stalls—a practice that we banned, as we have heard, in 1999. Most comes from EU countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and Poland. The requirement in the common understanding that exceptions to dynamic alignment must not

“negatively affect European Union animals and goods”

could prevent welfare-based restrictions on those imports. The fear is that that provision could systematically prevent the UK from applying its higher standards across the market. The UK must preserve its sovereign right to maintain and enhance domestic animal welfare standards for all products entering the market. The Government’s trade strategy is expected soon, and it is clear that that must ensure that animal welfare standards are not undermined by the Government’s approach to trade.

The Liberal Democrats also recognise the need to work on standards domestically. That is why we want to introduce a new comprehensive animal welfare Bill that would ensure the highest standards possible. In the UK, 11 million egg-laying hens, representing 18% of the egg-laying industry, are kept in “enriched” cages; and, although we banned sow stalls in 1999, farrowing crates are still legal and used for up to 60% of sows in the UK. Therefore we still have further to go if we are to continue proudly leading the world in animal welfare.

The Liberal Democrats have urged the Government to launch a consultation on the use of farrowing crates for pigs, and to end the use of cages for farm animals. However, I worry that some recent policy decisions might limit farmers’ ability to make progress. DEFRA transferred support for farmers looking to convert to organic out of the countryside stewardship scheme and into the sustainable farming incentive months before its abrupt closure, meaning that for the first time in 30 years no Government funding is available for farmers looking to convert to organic farming. Cuts to the nature-friendly farming budget, expected to be outlined in the forthcoming spending review, will limit farmers’ ability to improve animal welfare standards further. The Liberal Democrats are concerned about the impact that these measures will have on farmers across the country. Farmers have a huge role in hitting the Government’s environmental and climate change aims, but short-sighted decisions will make those aims impossible. The Liberal Democrats instead have pledged to add an additional £1 billion a year to the farming budget, which will help farmers to keep standards high while producing food for the country.

We must improve the UK’s food labelling with regard to animal welfare. Under the last Conservative Government, DEFRA, to its credit, undertook a consultation on introducing mandatory methods of product labelling.

[Sarah Dyke]

The assessment for that found that food labelling could improve animal welfare standards. It found that the policy would improve the welfare of 110 million meat chickens, 510,000 pigs, 250,000 beef cattle, 180,000 dairy cattle and 1 million sheep, while also financially benefiting farmers by around £40 million a year. The Liberal Democrats have called for labelling that includes the locality that the animal was reared in, the conditions they were kept in, the methods of slaughter and the environmental impact of the product. We can improve the lives of farmed animals while helping farmers increase their profitability.

The future of animal welfare standards in farming and farming businesses are intertwined. As a country, we are proud of our standards, but we can and should go further. This must come with a firm commitment not to undercut British farmers through trade deals, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

4.15 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) on securing the debate and providing the opportunity to discuss this critical matter further. We have heard powerful contributions from right across the House. I declare a strong professional and personal interest in animal health and welfare as a veterinary surgeon and a fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

In the United Kingdom we have brilliant farmers, who farm to the highest animal welfare standards, and we should be proud of that fact. In that regard, we have heard today that we can be a beacon to the rest of the world. I am extremely proud of the previous Conservative Government's record on improving animal welfare standards in farming and right across the board. That includes the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024, which banned the export from Great Britain of live animals, including cattle, sheep, pigs and horses, for slaughter and fattening; the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021, which increased the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years; the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, which enshrined animal sentience into UK law and established the Animal Sentience Committee so that any new legislation must pay due regard to animal welfare; and the Animals (Penalty Notices) Act 2022, which created new financial penalties for those who commit offences affecting the health and welfare of farmed animals, zoo animals and pets.

Furthermore, in 2023, the Conservative Government launched the animal health and welfare pathway—a partnership between farmers, vets, the wider industry and the supply chain that supports continual improvement in farm animal health and welfare. It includes access through funded vet visits to testing for priority diseases and to advice, to continually improve the health, welfare and productivity of farmed animals.

His Majesty's official Opposition support banning cages or close-confinement systems if there is clear scientific evidence that they are detrimental to animal or bird health and welfare. For example, the keeping of calves in veal crates was banned in 1990, the keeping of

sows in close-confinement stalls was, as we have heard today, banned in 1999 and the use of battery cages for laying hens was banned in 2012.

The market itself has also been trying to drive the move towards alternative systems for laying hens—primarily towards free range and barn—and away from the use of cages. That transition to non-cage egg production has been accelerated in recent years by the major supermarkets that pledged to stop selling shell eggs from hens kept in colony cages by 2025. Some supermarkets extended that to products containing liquid or powdered eggs.

Egg producers and consumers should rightly take pride in the quality of British eggs, with around 75% coming from free-range, barn and organic production systems. I hope the Government will continue to work with our farmers, supermarkets and other retailers to help ensure that that figure increases in the years to come.

Positive action taken by the previous Conservative Government is ensuring that animals are slaughtered domestically in high-welfare UK slaughterhouses, which have been fitted with CCTV since 2018. However, Members will be aware of the challenges facing the small abattoir sector, including a shortage of skilled workers, primarily because the jobs are relatively low paid and many people do not consider it an attractive industry to work in.

In 2007, the UK was home to almost 100 small abattoirs. Now it is estimated that only 49 small red meat abattoirs remain in England, Wales and Scotland. If closures continue at the current rate, it is estimated that none will be operating by 2030. It is important to mention that small abattoirs make a significant contribution to supporting the rural economy, enabling farmers to sell their meat locally in farm shops. Importantly—this goes to the point of this animal welfare debate—that maintains good animal health and welfare by reducing journey times to slaughter. The last Government launched the £4 million smaller abattoir fund to support small abattoirs. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline what action the Labour Government will take to ensure the long-term viability of the small abattoir sector so that we can reduce journey times for animals to slaughter.

Following our departure from the European Union, the last Government prioritised ensuring that we had some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. We must ensure that we do not row back on those standards. Can the Minister assure us that this Government will not weaken any of our high animal welfare standards as part of any shift towards dynamic alignment? Where we have higher standards than the EU—for example, with our ban on live animal exports for slaughter and fattening—does the Minister agree that we should use our influence to encourage the EU to adopt those higher standards?

Furthermore, the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 laid the foundations for breeding animals and birds that are protected from contracting harmful diseases. That could, for example, mean that birds are resistant to avian influenza, and we have seen the scourge of avian influenza across our country in recent years, devastating some of our poultry flocks. It could also mean developing pigs that are protected from porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome. This technology can be a win for animal and bird health and welfare, in addition to protecting the environment and public health and—as we have heard today—mitigating

antimicrobial resistance by reducing the usage of medicines. Can the Minister therefore assure us that the Government intend to lay the secondary legislation that will enable precision breeding in animals and birds, as they recently did—with cross-party support—for plants and crops? Can he also confirm that, as a result of the recent UK-EU summit, vital legislation on precision breeding will not be repealed or derogated?

We have heard a lot today about negotiating trade agreements, and it is important that within those agreements we uphold our high animal welfare standards. The last Government secured vital animal welfare chapters in both the Australian and the New Zealand trade deals. The UK Government must establish clear red lines in any trade deal with the USA and other countries, ensuring that products such as chlorine-washed poultry, hormone-treated beef and ractopamine-fed pork, or products in which antibiotics have been used as growth promoters, are not permitted to enter the UK market.

Just last year, when the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), served as Secretary of State for Business and Trade, she suspended trade negotiations with Canada due to its insistence on including hormone-treated beef in the agreement. That decisive action sent a strong message that the UK will not compromise on its ban on hormone-treated beef, ractopamine-treated pork and chlorine-washed chicken products, which are illegal in this country. Standing firm on those standards demonstrates our commitment to animal welfare and signals to the world that if other countries want to trade with us, they must meet our values and our standards. I hope that the current Government continue to follow that Conservative example.

To have and maintain high animal welfare standards on farms, and to ensure the viability and resilience of the sector, the Government must prioritise biosecurity—I have deep affection and respect for the Minister, and he knows where I am going with this. The official Opposition recently supported the statutory instrument, which we laid the foundations for, that removed the 16-week derogation period. As a result, free-range egg producers and packers can label and market eggs as free-range for the duration of a mandatory housing measure, as called for by the chief veterinary officer in response to avian influenza, however long that may last.

We have heard a lot today about labelling. The last Government ran a consultation on food labelling, which considered proposals to introduce clearer labelling requirements on the country of origin and the method of production for certain foods. Those proposals sought to improve transparency and consistency around food labelling, making it easier for consumers to make informed decisions when purchasing food and allowing them to choose products that align with their values. The current Government are yet to respond to that consultation, so I would be grateful if the Minister can update us on where they are with that.

In addition, will the Minister please clarify when the Government will close the loophole in the Government buying standards for public procurement, whereby public bodies can deviate from high animal welfare standards on the grounds of cost? To set an example to the world, we must get our own house in order, so I would be grateful if the Minister can update us on that.

To have high animal welfare standards, we need healthy animals, and for that we need strong biosecurity. I have long called on the Government to rapidly redevelop the Animal and Plant Health Agency headquarters in Weybridge, in Surrey. We are extremely grateful for all that it does to keep us safe and for its vigilance in terms of disease surveillance and management on the frontline. It is pivotal in protecting against devastating diseases such as foot and mouth disease, seen this year in Germany, Hungary and Slovakia, and African swine fever, which is advancing up the continent of Europe. Will the Government finish the work the Conservatives started when we committed £1.2 billion in 2020 to redevelop the APHA headquarters? Labour has repeatedly reannounced £208 million. That is a start, but when will it commit the further £1.4 billion for that critical national infrastructure, for the sake of UK agriculture and our national security?

I pay tribute to all our farmers, growers and producers and to everyone else involved in producing food in our country. Food security is paramount for us, and we must uphold high animal welfare. We owe the people working on the frontline a debt of gratitude; thanks to them, we in this country enjoy a wide range of high-quality meat, poultry and dairy products that have been produced in high welfare standard conditions.

Sadly, farmers face an array of challenges because of the Labour Government's punitive decisions, from the family farm tax to the closure of the sustainable farming incentive scheme. For the sake of our food, national security, animal health and welfare, and rural mental health, I strongly urge the Minister to consider the consequences of those policies and to stand up for farmers and animals in this country.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask him to leave a little time for the mover of the motion to sum up the debate.

4.27 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) on securing this important debate. I also congratulate all those who have contributed to what has been a thoughtful debate.

We are a nation of animal lovers, as has been made very clear to me since I became an Environment Minister. As Members would expect, animal welfare issues consistently form a significant proportion of the correspondence that comes across my desk. I want to start by saying a bit about people, because I have “food security” in my job title, and I take it very seriously. I am very proud of the people across our country who, at this very moment, whether on land or at sea, are producing the food that we absolutely expect to be available. It is an extraordinarily complicated and sophisticated system; of course it can be improved, and we have heard suggestions for improvement, but it is important that we register just how extraordinary the food system already is. When there are transgressions—it occasionally happens that people in this place transgress—we should not see people as guilty by association. We should celebrate the success of the system, as well as the challenges.

[*Daniel Zeichner*]

We are rightly proud that this country's animal welfare standards are very high; in fact, they are one of the selling points of our agricultural sector. They are greatly valued by consumers at home and are part of our sales pitch to people abroad. We want to build on and maintain our world-leading record on animal health and welfare, and we are absolutely committed to ensuring that animals receive the care, respect and protection they deserve.

The Labour party has a proud history of improving animal welfare. Next year will mark 20 years since the previous Labour Government introduced the landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006, which still represents the most fundamental change to our animal welfare law in nearly a century.

All farm animals are protected by comprehensive and robust animal health and welfare legislation. The Animal Welfare Act makes it an offence to either cause any captive animal unnecessary suffering or to fail to provide for the welfare needs of the animal. The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 set down detailed requirements on how farmed livestock should be kept. There is also legislation that sets out specific conditions that need to be met for permitted procedures, such as tail docking, to be performed on certain species of animals.

In addition to farm animal welfare legislation, my Department has a series of statutory species-specific welfare codes, such as the code of practice for the welfare of meat chickens, which farmers are required by law to have access to and be familiar with. That encourages high standards of husbandry. As we have heard, we want to do better, and I absolutely understand that the keeping of farm animals in cages and close confinement systems is a topic that has exercised many of us over many years in this place. It is one that I absolutely assure hon. Members is currently receiving my very careful attention.

I am well aware of recent and long-running campaigns that have urged the Government to publish consultations on phasing out the use of enriched colony cages for laying hens and farrowing crates for pigs. Many Members have spoken passionately about that. I am sure Members are aware that the Petitions Committee has selected a recent e-petition on the use of cages and crates for debate, and many of us will be back here in a couple of weeks' time to discuss those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) raised a series of points around those issues. She also raised the culling of male chickens. I followed that subject very closely. Clearly, the technology, as she rightly pointed out, now allows chicks to be sexed within the egg. We very much welcome the UK egg industry's interest in the development of day zero sexing technology. This is one of the areas on which we can move forward.

I also want to address the points on trade, because that has been one of the key themes in this debate. It is very topical and there is a lot going on in the world. Ending the use of these systems is an issue that our European trading partners are also carefully considering. We heard a number of interventions, including from my hon.

Friend the Member for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake)—she and I have debated these issues on many occasions over the years.

I was also delighted to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer), who is a genuine friend. She raised a particular issue around decapod culling. My Department is talking to both the industry and relevant animal welfare non-governmental organisations on potential non-statutory guidance on which methods of killing decapods are or are not in line with the existing welfare at time of killing legal requirements. I hope she will find that encouraging.

As a number of Members have pointed out, with any change to our farming systems we need to evaluate the implications for trade. When considering welfare standards at home, it is crucial that we consider the potential for unintentionally replacing UK production with lower welfare production overseas—that point was well made by my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling). Replacing a UK egg with an imported caged egg would be not only bad for the consumer and bad for the producers, but bad for animal welfare as well.

These are complicated questions. I am not going to go into the fine detail of all the trade points, but I will make a few observations. We have been absolutely clear as a Government that we will use our trade strategy to promote the highest food production standards. We are determined to prevent farmers from being undercut by low welfare and low standards in trade deals. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) all raised those points. I will say a little about some of the recent trade deals with the United States, India and, of course, the European Union, which I think are to be celebrated, frankly.

The United States deal does not change our own sanitary and phytosanitary regime. This—and any future agreement—only concerns US food products that have existing access to the UK market. We are absolutely committed to our high welfare standards and high consumer standards. I assure colleagues that chlorinated chicken and hormone-treated beef will remain illegal in the United Kingdom.

On the EU agreement, the European Union has accepted that there will need to be a number of areas where we need to retain our own rules. It is still subject to negotiation, but we have been absolutely clear about the importance of being able to set high animal welfare standards, support public health and use innovative technologies. The shadow Minister raised the issue of precision breeding. We have clearly been closely involved in that debate over a long time. I am determined to ensure that we protect our position.

On factory farming in general, I do not agree with some of the comments about large-scale production. The key issue is not size but ensuring that every farm complies with comprehensive UK law on animal health and welfare, planning, veterinary medicines and environmental legislation. Stockmanship and high husbandry standards are the key to ensuring appropriate welfare standards for all farmed animals. I appreciate the nervousness about large farms, but I have seen less than wonderful

standards of biosecurity on smaller farms—although that has not always been the fault of the people involved. I do not think the issue is size; it is quality, and the ability of that business to carry out its work in a correct and safe way.

On the animal health and welfare pathway, I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Epping Forest and his colleagues in the previous Parliament on this important point. Improving animal health underpins the welfare of farmed animals, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, slows the rise of antimicrobial resistance, better protects farmers and the public against the economic impact of disease, and helps to demonstrate a commitment to rising standards of animal health and welfare to our current and future trading partners across the world. It is really important, and we are good at it—we should be proud and celebrate it.

The pathway aims to promote the production of healthier, higher-welfare animals at a level beyond compliance with regulations, and to deliver sustained improvements over time, which address the challenges of the future as well as those of today.

Carla Lockhart: The Minister will be aware that access to veterinary medicines is key for animal welfare. He will know that Northern Ireland continues to face a cliff edge with regards to access to veterinary medicines. Will he commit to update hon. Members interested in this issue quickly, given its impact on the industry?

Daniel Zeichner: I assure the hon. Lady that we are very aware of that issue. I can also assure her in passing that I have regular dialogue with Minister Muir on the issues she raised.

I would like to say something about the funding that has been made available to help farmers. In early 2025, we announced £16.7 million of funding for a new round of animal health and welfare grants delivered through the farming equipment and technology fund. Applications are currently open, with livestock farmers able to apply for funding towards the cost of equipment and technology that delivers benefits for animal health and welfare.

On the poor behaviour that has been referenced, like all of us I have been shocked by some of the things we have seen. I listened closely to my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy). He is absolutely right that such unacceptable behaviour must be taken extremely seriously. It is imperative that any suspicion of animal cruelty is reported to DEFRA's Animal and Plant Health Agency as quickly as possible, so that timely investigations can take place and the welfare of animals safeguarded. I am told that there can be a gap between some of these incidents and the reporting, which makes it difficult to move forward.

More generally on enforcement, the Animal and Plant Health Agency inspectors and local authorities conduct inspections on farms to check that animal welfare standards are being met. The vast majority of owners and keepers both comply with their duty of care and follow the law, but there are occasions when some fail to do so. It is absolutely the responsibility of enforcement authorities to use appropriate enforcement tools to ensure that the law is upheld, to protect animals and people and to encourage animal keepers to be compliant now and in future. To ensure that we have a transparent enforcement regime, we are actively working with enforcement authorities

to reform the way they collect and publish data of on-farm enforcement activities and the actions they take to support compliance and act on non-compliance.

I am aware of your strictures on time, Sir John, so I will finish by saying a little about the important points made by a number of hon. Members about labelling: my hon. Friends the Members for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) and for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan), and the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epping Forest. We are looking at labelling extremely closely. There are so many things that people want to know about, and I am talking to a whole range of stakeholders about how we can get the issue right and take it forward. The points that have been made are very important. There is a real opportunity to improve the welfare side, but there are many other things we can do with it as well.

I am also mindful of the points made about some of the farm assurance schemes. I think they are an extremely important tool and lever, but they are, of course, independent—and that is part of their strength and importance. We need to make sure that we can achieve, with them, the kind of improvements that we wish to see. I reassure the shadow spokesperson that £208 million has been made available to the National Biosecurity Centre; I am sure he would join me in being pleased to hear that. I also assure him that we are working very hard to ensure that the future is secure.

Let me conclude by saying that the Government were elected on a mandate to introduce the most ambitious plans in a generation to improve animal welfare, and that is exactly what we are going to do. Our farm animal welfare policy is backed by robust science and evidence, and supported and shaped by input from expert advice groups, including the Animal Welfare Committee, as well as funded research and development. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is currently undertaking a series of meetings with key stakeholders as part of developing an overarching approach to animal welfare. I very much look forward to coming back to talk to hon. Members in more detail about that in due course.

4.41 pm

Adrian Ramsay: Sir John, I believe that I have two and a half minutes, under the updated timings for this afternoon.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Yes.

Adrian Ramsay: Thank you Sir John, Mr Vickers, and everybody who has contributed this afternoon on this important topic. We have seen how much interest there is across the House in driving up the animal welfare standards and I very much appreciate the Minister's response, which set out the plans he already has in train.

I want to respond briefly to some of those points. On the Minister's plans to review farrowing crates and cages, I look forward to seeing the outcome of that—I think everyone here today does—and I hope there are some big steps forward as a result. I was pleased to hear the answer in relation to maintaining standards in trade, but I did not quite hear the Minister go so far as to say that the Government will not allow imports of products that do not meet UK standards. I would invite him to

[Adrian Ramsay]

do that. On enforcement, I did not quite hear the Minister address the need for higher penalties, independent inspections and proper resourcing of agencies for when standards of welfare are breached. That is critical.

Lastly, on size: I take the Minister's point that it is not the only factor, but look at the size of the Methwold application—it would have involved 870,000 chickens and 14,000 pigs. How could welfare be maintained at that size, with a tiny handful of staff and a huge impact on sewage and pollution? Given the proliferation of mega-farms, those issues must be tackled.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered animal welfare standards in farming.

Inheritance Tax: Family-owned Businesses

4.45 pm

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I will call Susan Murray to move the motion, and then the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of Inheritance Tax on family-owned businesses.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John, and a privilege to lead this debate on a matter of real consequence to our economy. I begin by paying tribute to the extraordinary contributions that family-owned businesses make across the country, not least in my own Mid Dunbartonshire constituency. They are not just economic actors; they are part of the fabric of our communities. They offer good local jobs and apprenticeships, sponsor local sports teams, support local charitable activities, and keep our high streets and industrial parks alive with character, energy and local pride.

According to the Fraser of Allander Institute, in 2025 family-owned businesses are in turbulent and uncertain times. They are facing national insurance increases, with many scaling back plans for workforce expansion and recruitment as a result. The latest quarterly economic indicator from the Scottish Chambers of Commerce network presents a stark picture, as businesses face pressure that threatens to derail growth, investment and competitiveness. Taxation is now the No. 1 concern facing Scottish businesses.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She is absolutely right to highlight the issue of taxation. Does she agree that taxing businesses at 20% based on their value at the time of the owner's death cannot possibly take into account the owner's personal input into the business, and leaves a situation that can run a successful business into the ground? There is only so much that one person can be taxed before the burden is too great, and the taxation the Government are pushing is definitely going to destroy the farming sector.

Susan Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue; I completely agree.

The Centre for Economics and Business Research found that nine out of every 10 privately owned businesses in the UK are family owned, and that they provide employment for nearly 16 million people and contribute more than £200 billion in taxes annually.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I congratulate her on securing this important debate. Did she see the research published yesterday by Family Business UK, which points to the disastrous impact of the inheritance tax reforms on family-owned businesses? In my West Worcestershire constituency alone, the changes will lead to a reduction of £18 million of gross value added and of 286 full-time equivalent jobs.

Susan Murray: I thank the hon. Member for raising that issue. I have seen the research and will refer to it later in my speech. That was a timely publication.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for being generous on this important issue. When she spoke about the contribution that family businesses make, she could have been talking about J. W. Lees, a brewery in my constituency that has a nearly 200-year history of making contributions to the local community and brewing very good beer, or to Joseph Holt, which is on the edge of my constituency. The Confederation of British Industry estimates that the proposed changes to business property relief will lose the Government nearly £1.9 billion. Does the hon. Lady agree that before the Government go through with the changes, they should have a consultation that looks at the impact on tax and local family businesses?

Susan Murray: I completely agree: it appears that there are many factors the Government have not taken into account.

The situation was brought home to me by a local company in my constituency: Archibald Young Ltd Founders and Engineers, a family-run foundry that has been operating in Kirkintilloch since 1959—not quite as long as the business mentioned by the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer). I thank Ian Young for sharing his company's position and highlighting the vital role that it plays in defence by producing high-precision critical components. Since it was established, the company has grown steadily over three generations. At one time, Scotland had over 260 foundries; it now has 12, of which 11 are family-owned, and all are third generation.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Will she make the point that we do not really understand where the Government are coming from? I understand why they want to claw back money from big estates, or from people who buy farms just to avoid inheritance tax—not Jeremy Clarkson of course; he is a fantastic chap—but I cannot understand why they are focusing on family farms. Will the hon. Lady make the point that the National Farmers Union has offered various compromises, and the Minister should meet the NFU in a positive way to ensure that we keep our family farms run by families?

Susan Murray: I agree; it is important we understand that these businesses and family farms exist in their own right and are not simply personal property, even though they are family owned.

Today, under Andrew Young, Young's foundry continues to provide skilled and specialist manufacturing from its bases in Kirkintilloch, Motherwell and the north of England. Like so many of the family-run firms we are here to talk about, its success has been built over decades of hard work and reinvestment in its business and workforce, yet recent Government policies are putting that at risk.

Clearly, family-owned businesses can cope with challenges in the economic and business environment, which they have navigated over generations, but when Government policies are hostile to their success and survival, their

ability to create jobs and grow the economy is eroded and their future is uncertain. Whether it is rising energy and employment costs, burdensome business rates or disproportionate regulatory hurdles, these enterprises face challenges that their multinational competitors are often better equipped to absorb, or that they do not face at all.

The reforms to business property relief and agricultural relief announced in the 2024 autumn Budget have dealt family businesses a blow that risks undermining the very principle of intergenerational succession that has been at the heart of their success. They must retain profits to reinvest in business assets, to enhance business competitiveness and invest in product development.

Prior to the reforms, the shares held in private family-owned businesses could be passed on upon death to the next family generation, free of inheritance tax. This was enabled by the shares qualifying for 100% business property relief. The 2024 Budget introduced a new £1 million relief cap beyond which inheritance tax is due, with business property relief of 50%, resulting in an inheritance tax charge of 20% being applied to such transfers upon death. This sudden change means that family financial planning opportunities are much more limited. Under the new rules any lifetime transfer of business property relief or agricultural property relief assets made on or after 30 October 2024 will be subject to the new relief limits if the donor dies on or after 6 April 2026.

GAP Holdings Ltd is another family-owned business based in my constituency. I thank Mark Anderson of GAP for allowing me to share his company's position in this debate. He has also met the Secretary of State for Business and Trade and colleagues. Founded in 1969, GAP's tool-hire business has grown dramatically. By reinvesting in its assets over the past 10 years, it has tripled its turnover and now employs over 2,000 people across the UK. GAP's annual profit to March was £44 million, and its earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation were £132 million. For GAP, the potential inheritance tax charge arising upon the death of the second generation would amount to tens of millions of pounds. The proposed £1 million relief cap would make no meaningful difference to the size of the problem. Three months ago, GAP exceeded the £1 million mark in its total donations to charitable causes. That is the kind of benefit that these businesses bring to the community.

The inheritance tax changes would require the independent valuation of companies. Will the Minister clarify whether there is a consistent and defined methodology for that activity? When a family business owner dies and leaves shares to the next generation, there is no cash available to pay inheritance tax liability and no windfall to successors. In practical terms, it is business as usual, and the business continues to use its assets to trade and contribute economically to the local community. It is not the same as selling a business; however, it may force the company to be sold completely to pay the liability.

Will the Minister confirm that it is not the Government's intention that a family-owned business that has been passed down through the generations is forced to be sold as a result of the change, or forced into failure by having to take on unsustainable levels of debt?

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate on a very important issue. Like herself, I have spoken to GAP, as well as other family businesses in my constituency. Does she agree that although the Government are absolutely right to ensure that we have enough funding to pay for public services through tax changes, one option might be to allow businesses to pay inheritance tax in the way proposed if that business is passed on to another family member, so that the tax liability is still met, but in a way that does not impact on future generations and allows the businesses to succeed and thrive?

Susan Murray: It is important to look at all ways to make sure we have a system that does not cause the demise of family-owned businesses.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I could be wrong, but I am pretty sure that the guidance from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs states that, at present, where there is 100% relief, valuations for BPR are done on the basis of the book value, which is, as my hon. Friend will know, often very different from an asset's actual value. That being the case, I wonder how easy it would be for the Government to have reached any reasonable understanding of the actual value of the assets that they now seek to tax.

Susan Murray: That was the point I was making when I asked the Minister whether there is an established methodology to make sure that the valuation of companies reflects the current situation.

This change does not target the ultra-wealthy or global conglomerates. In many parts of the UK even modest enterprises, especially those with land and equipment, which are often the biggest local employers, exceed the £1 million relief cap. Unlike large corporations, family businesses cannot just offshore ownership structures or use complex tax arbitrage to avoid the costs.

I am sure that every Member present, including the Minister, agrees that preserving the businesses at the heart of our communities should be the Government's priority, not erecting barriers that create an environment too toxic for family businesses to survive. Will the Minister consider raising the relief cap to £2 million, as requested by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce network? That would make more family businesses exempt from this dangerous inheritance tax, thereby protecting jobs and local businesses.

The reality is that the Government have not undertaken an impact assessment, and according to estimates by the Office for Budget Responsibility, the changes to business property relief and agricultural property relief will raise only around £1.8 billion over a four-year period. That amount comes with a high uncertainty rating, because behaviour change might alter it significantly, and it cannot be compared with the £27 billion of VAT, late PAYE and national insurance that HMRC is yet to collect.

Forcing family businesses to reduce investment, withdraw capital, dispose of assets or sell or shut their business entirely to release cash to fund inheritance tax liability will weaken the competitiveness of not only the businesses themselves, but the wider UK economy. The changes may be well-intentioned, but they are misdirected in their execution. They risk treating genuine business owners

in the same way as passive investors, and in doing so they ignore the fact that these reliefs were originally designed to protect the continuity of real working businesses in real communities.

In conclusion, will the Minister consider amending the proposed legislation to ensure that the changes do not weaken genuine family businesses—

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Member is making a very powerful speech. Before she closes, it is important for us just to home in on the figures. A Family Business UK report shows that in my constituency the changes to business property relief and agricultural property relief will result in a £23.63 million reduction in gross value added and the loss of 381 full-time equivalent jobs, as well as being the end of many family farms. Multiplying those figures out across the United Kingdom means the loss of 208,000 jobs, a £14.8 billion reduction in GVA and a net fiscal loss to the Government of £1.9 billion. Does she agree that the death tax is immoral and should be scrapped?

Susan Murray: I certainly agree that we need to protect our family-owned businesses and do everything we can to help them to thrive, rather than putting them in a position whereby the economy is at risk of losing both jobs and growth.

I will finish the question that I was putting to the Minister. Will he consider amending the proposed legislation to ensure that the changes do not weaken genuine family businesses, and make the transfer of shares in a family business to the next generation exempt from inheritance tax for seven years, provided that the business is not sold in that period? If it is sold within that period, inheritance tax would become payable, along with the capital gains tax, both of which could be funded from the proceeds of the sale.

This Government have stated that growing the UK economy is essential, but attacking the backbone of the economy—the family businesses that have proved they can adapt and change rapidly to meet changing market needs and conditions, and that support supply chains and local jobs—must not happen. Family businesses should be supported, not raided for a relatively de minimis gain to the Exchequer.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I hope he will leave me a couple of moments at the end of the debate to put the question.

5.3 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): It is a pleasure, Sir John, to speak in this debate with you as Chair, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) on securing it—I notice that the debate is being opened and closed by a Murray.

I know that some Members are very concerned about the impact of forthcoming reforms to inheritance tax reliefs on businesses in their constituencies, and I understand that people feel very strongly about inheritance tax. I should be clear that the Government believe that our reforms to business property relief and agricultural property relief get the balance right between supporting farms and businesses and fixing the public finances in a fair way. The reforms reduce the inheritance tax advantages

available to owners of agricultural and business assets, but still mean that those assets will be taxed at a much lower effective rate than most other assets.

Let me make clear that, much like the hon. Lady set out, the Government recognise and greatly value the huge contribution that small and family-owned businesses make to their communities and the economy. Businesses large and small, including family businesses, will create jobs and wealth and be the engines of growth in the economy. Those businesses and their workforces are the backbone of our economy, and they are fundamental to kickstarting economic growth, which is the Government's No. 1 mission. Those businesses need a Government who will take the right decisions in the national interest, including when they are difficult, to support our security and prosperity.

People who own, run and work in businesses of all sizes will remember the economic context that we inherited last year. They know how important responsible financial management is within their own businesses and how the success of businesses and their workforces depends on economic stability and public services that function well. I believe that many of them will understand that, since taking office, the Government have taken a number of difficult but necessary decisions on tax, welfare and spending to restore economic stability, fix the public finances and support public services. None of these decisions, including the decision to reform agricultural property relief and business property relief, was taken lightly, but those tough decisions were left to us by the previous Administration, and no responsible Government could have let things carry on as they were.

Alongside our work to stabilise the economy and restore discipline to the public finances, the Government are determined to do everything we can to support businesses to grow. We are overhauling the UK's regulatory system to reduce burdens on businesses by 25% by the end of this Parliament. We have secured trade deals that will slash the cost of doing business abroad, reduce border checks, cut tariffs and axe red tape. Those trade deals will support jobs and create opportunities for Great British businesses in our biggest current markets and in one of the world's biggest future markets, too.

The Government expect to publish an SME strategy later this year. It will set out the Government's vision for SMEs, from encouraging entrepreneurship to boosting scale-ups across key policy areas, such as creating thriving high streets, making it easier to access finance, opening up overseas and domestic markets, building business capabilities and providing a strong business environment.

Despite the tough fiscal inheritance at the election last year, we have also taken decisions to continue supporting small businesses through the tax system. We have chosen to increase the employment allowance to £10,500 to take many small businesses out of paying national insurance contributions altogether. We froze the small business rates multiplier to protect small properties from inflationary bill increases, and we will introduce permanently lower business tax rates for small retail, hospitality and leisure businesses from 2026.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): In rural and coastal communities such as South East Cornwall, family-run businesses and farms are the backbone of the local economy. Does the Minister agree that any changes to

inheritance tax must be carefully shaped to support our local businesses and farms to plan for their future so that they can pass on their hard-earned success?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is a great champion of businesses and farmers in her constituency. When we were deciding how to reform agricultural property relief and business property relief, we made sure that generous tax reliefs still existed in the tax system precisely because we want to continue to support small and family-owned farms and businesses in particular. I will come to those in a moment.

I am conscious that you asked me to give you a few moments at the end, Sir John. Do you mean at the end of my remarks?

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I need about 15 seconds at the very end of your remarks.

James Murray: Got it. To conclude my remarks on the wider support that we are giving to businesses, I also draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that we committed in the "Corporate Tax Roadmap", which was published at the autumn Budget, to maintain the small profits rates and marginal relief at their current rates and thresholds, as well as the £1 million annual investment allowance.

I know that many Members are concerned about the reforms to inheritance tax that are the subject of the debate, so I will now turn to them. The reality is that the full, unlimited relief introduced in 1992 has become unfair and unsustainable, particularly in the economic context that we inherited. Under the current system, the 100% relief on business and agricultural assets is heavily skewed towards the wealthiest estates, which is clear from the latest HMRC data from 2021-22. More than 50% of business property relief was claimed by just 4% of estates making claims. That means that the wealthiest few per cent of estates claimed £558 million in tax relief. That contributes to the very largest estates paying a lower average effective inheritance tax rate than smaller estates. It is neither fair nor sustainable to maintain such a large tax break for such a small number of claimants, given the wider pressures on the public finances. It is for that reason that the Government are changing how we target agricultural property relief and business property relief.

Under the reformed system, estates will still benefit from 100% relief for the first £1 million of combined assets from April 2026, and on top of that there will be an uncapped 50% relief on further assets. That means that inheritance tax will be paid at a reduced effective rate of up to 20%, rather than the standard 40%. Those reliefs sit on top of the standard nil-rate bands and other exemptions, such as transfers between spouses and civil partners.

Susan Murray: Why do the Government not consider taxing large digital multinational corporations trading in this country in order to raise the extra revenue that is being raised from this measure, which effectively punishes the businesses that run the supply chains that export to those markets? Those businesses have relationships with specialist suppliers and are being put at risk.

James Murray: I believe that the hon. Lady is asking about the taxation of large multinational firms operating in the digital space. I am sure that she is aware of the digital services tax, which is currently in operation. The Government are committed to maintaining that until the pillar 1 international solution is implemented, and I am sure that she is familiar with pillar 2 of the OECD deal on a global minimum corporate tax rate. Large multinational firms are well dealt with on the international level, which is why, in opposition and in government, we have supported the OECD's two-pillar solution.

I do not want to be distracted from the design of the reforms that we are talking about today. Where inheritance tax is due, those liable for a charge can pay any liability on the relevant assets over 10 annual interest-free instalments. That benefit is not seen anywhere else in the inheritance tax system.

There has been a lot of discussion of the impact of this policy, so let me set out the numbers, based on HMRC claims data. It is expected that, under these reforms, about 1,500 estates claiming only business property relief will pay more inheritance tax in 2026-27. Two thirds of those estates—about 1,000—are expected to only hold shares designated as not listed on the markets of recognised stock exchanges, such as the alternative investment market. Under these reforms, about three quarters of estates claiming business property relief in 2026-27, excluding estates only holding shares designated as not listed, will not pay any more inheritance tax in 2026-27.

The reforms to relief have generated a lot of commentary about the wider impacts, but hon. Members should take care when relying on analysis based on self-selecting surveys from members of representative groups campaigning

against the reforms. Indeed, the independent Office for Budget Responsibility is clear that it does not expect this measure to have any significant macroeconomic impacts, and it certified the costing at autumn Budget 2024. It said that the reforms to agricultural property relief and business property relief are forecast to raise a combined £520 million in 2029-30.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I recognise the need for the Government to raise funds, given the economic context that they inherited, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) said, a number of family businesses have come forward with alternative proposals that would raise the funds in a different way. Would the Minister and his team be prepared to meet and consult with family businesses to ensure that they have input into the plans? That would enable those businesses to inform them of their experiences and raise alternative proposals that might raise funds differently.

James Murray: I reassure my hon. Friend that I, and the wider team of officials, have had a number of meetings with representatives of family businesses and the agricultural and farming sector. We have listened to ideas raised by a number of people we have met, as well as ideas raised in debates in the Commons and in meetings in the Treasury and elsewhere. We have listened, but we remain confident that our approach is a fair way to balance supporting farms and businesses with fixing the public finances, so we stand by our reforms.

I should probably conclude. I thank all hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire, for their contributions to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Serious Fraud Office

5.17 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Serious Fraud Office and tackling fraud and economic crime.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. Economic crime affects us all. The fraud, money laundering, grand corruption and bribery that the Serious Fraud Office was established to address can threaten the integrity of our markets, the functioning of our economy, the security of our nation and even the very fabric of our democracy, and fuel misery and corruption around the world.

Confronting the challenge posed by serious economic crime is crucial, but sometimes lost in this conversation is its link to a second kind of economic crime: the fraud that affects our constituents directly and touches millions of lives every year in our country. All too often, those two strands of economic crime are talked about separately. Although I have only a few minutes today, and cannot touch on every facet of economic crime, I will take this opportunity to talk about the two strands together; as economic crime evolves, they are becoming increasingly entwined and, if we are to tackle the corrosive impact of economic crime, we must address both.

I want to start by telling the House about a constituent of mine; let us call him Brian. Brian is a hard-working, community-spirited man who has spent his life playing by the rules. He is not naïve—he has decades of experience and a sharp eye for detail—but last year, he was caught out by a sophisticated scam. Within hours, Brian lost more than £40,000—his entire life savings. The impact has been devastating, not only financially, but emotionally. His trust, confidence and sense of security have been shattered. Sadly, that is far from an isolated incident. Virtually every MP I speak to has similar stories of constituents who have suffered.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. He mentions constituents: two of my constituents in Ealing Southall were victims of the collapse of JVIP Group, a complicated network of 100 companies. Although some victims were compensated by their banks, the collapse of the company was not properly investigated by police or the Serious Fraud Office. Does he agree that it is important to take a consistent approach to allegations of complex corporate crime and that the Serious Fraud Office should look at these issues seriously?

David Pinto-Duschinsky: I am sorry to hear about what has happened to my hon. Friend's constituents. She is of course right that these kinds of crimes must be investigated—we must see consistent and robust investigation, a point I will touch on later in my speech.

The figures are stark. Under the last Conservative Government, fraud surged at every level. Between 2010 and 2024, reported fraud cases in the UK more than doubled, making it the single most prevalent crime type in the country. According to the crime survey for England and Wales, fraud now accounts for more than 40% of all crime. That is more than 4.1 million incidents in 2024 alone—or, put another way, one incident every 10 seconds.

It is a sign of how ubiquitous fraud has become that we have almost stopped noticing the fraud attempts we all face every day—the dodgy emails and texts, the suspicious phone calls, the fake listings on online marketplaces. Many of us now just accept the regular attempts to defraud us as part of the weft and weave of modern life.

The economic impact has been enormous. UK Finance estimates that more than £1.1 billion was stolen by fraudsters last year, including nearly £460 million in authorised push payment scams. The public purse has also come under attack, with up to £55 billion in public money lost to benefit and procurement fraud and other types of economic crime. But it is not just about the economic cost: the human cost has been enormous too, paid in the currency of suffering and lives turned upside down. It is hard to overstate how shattering fraud is for its victims.

This explosion in scams, great and small, has been driven by increasingly sophisticated, increasingly transnational and increasingly organised criminality, and sharpened by rapid innovation and technological evolution. Some 67% of all fraud in the UK is now cyber-enabled. Fraud is no longer just about opportunistic criminals and simple phishing emails; criminals have become highly sophisticated, harnessing the power of technology in alarming ways.

The use of artificial technology and deepfake technology is now commonplace, not just in social media, but in the execution of daring scams against major companies. For example, in February last year, a company lost more than £20 million as a result of a chief executive officer scam, where AI was used to fool executives into thinking that they were dealing with their boss. Meanwhile, sophisticated fraud-as-a-service websites such as Russian Coms have helped domestic criminals to use advanced technology to defraud the public. Our institutions are caught in a never-ending arms race against ever more adept and advanced criminality.

All too often, the growth of fraud has also been enabled by the inaction of some players across the ecosystem. Banks and financial institutions have generally stepped up their efforts to limit retail fraud, and last year stopped more than £1.4 billion of fraudulent payments, as well as paying out £1.2 billion in compensation. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for major tech companies. They have often failed to take sufficient steps to combat the fraud propagated on or through their platforms and have not put in sufficiently robust “know your customer” and transaction monitoring controls, or even used the systems they already have. Their failure to act has left the social media and online commerce landscape vulnerable and has exacted a large price on others.

Law enforcement has also struggled to keep up with the threat. Under the last Government, despite its accounting for almost half of all crime, fraud received only between 1% and 2% of police budgets, and enforcement was often hamstrung by poor infrastructure and limited collaboration between forces.

The story on major fraud, bribery and economic crime shows strong parallels. The threat has grown significantly and is increasingly transnational in scope. Just as the authorities have historically struggled against the evolving fraud we see in our daily lives, so the institutions focusing on major fraud and the enforcement

[David Pinto-Duschinsky]

of our anti-bribery laws, in particular the SFO, have often struggled as well. I need not rehearse here some of the challenges the SFO has faced with failed prosecutions, insufficient powers, questions over leadership and a lack of resources.

However, in recent times under the current Government, we are beginning to see real change. The Government are driving a strategy to tackle the fraud challenge. There is renewed focus on tackling the frauds that affect us all. The police and the National Crime Agency are seeking to invest in increased capacity and strengthen inter-force collaboration to tackle cross-country and transnational threats.

Central Government are also strengthening the tools available to combat fraud in the benefit and procurement systems with, for example, the measures in the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which had its Third Reading in the Commons recently. After years of the previous Government failing to update the powers that Departments such as the Department for Work and Pensions had, leaving them with 20th-century powers to fight a 21st-century problem, this Government are finally getting the modern, anti-fraud tools they need.

Critically, the SFO is undergoing positive change. Under new leadership, the organisation has published a five-year strategy focused on upgrading its capabilities, making smarter use of intelligence and driving co-ordinated enforcement. There are more reforms on the table aimed at further improving its reach and effectiveness, from enhancing international co-operation to bringing in financial incentives for whistleblowers. There is of course further to go, but the Serious Fraud Office is evidently becoming more effective, and has recently achieved some notable successes.

However, if we are to tackle fraud and economic crime at all levels, these welcome improvements in policy and institutional effectiveness will need to be matched by changes across the whole anti-financial crime landscape. We will need to see stronger partnerships and collaboration, including among the police, better implementation and some actors, especially the big tech firms, stepping up to the plate. Online platforms should, for example, implement effective identity verification for commerce, enhance their monitoring and takedown procedures and, crucially, contribute to compensation when fraud occurs.

I am sure that, over the course of the debate, we will hear discussion of many facets of this problem, and I am conscious that I have not had the opportunity in my remarks to touch on issues ranging from the policing of money laundering to making progress on issues such as ultimate beneficial ownership. However, all these points ultimately have in common the essential nature of this fight.

This is a national challenge. The human cost of economic crime is devastating. We cannot afford to treat small fraud as trivial, or grand fraud and economic crime as inevitable. Both are corrosive; both must be tackled, and that must be done across Government and in banks, big tech and law enforcement. It is a necessary fight that this Government are already taking on, and a fight we can ill afford to lose.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate; I can see that some have already taken that advice.

5.28 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) on securing this debate on the important work of the SFO in tackling economic crime. The all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax recently met with the Serious Fraud Office team and its director. I have the pleasure of chairing that APPG, a role I inherited from our current anti-corruption champion Baroness Hodge. I thank the SFO's staff and leadership for taking on incredibly complex cases in the national interest. It was clear that the SFO has an ambitious agenda to tackle serious economic crime, but it was equally clear that without sustained political and financial backing from Government, and cross-Government work to prevent economic crime and fraud, the agency will not be able to fulfil its potential.

I am therefore pleased that this Government have committed to a new cross-Government anti-corruption strategy, led by the joint anti-corruption unit at the Home Office. I hope that that strategy will include some of the policies that will help deter and prevent economic crime and fraud in the first place, and I will mention a couple of them before moving on to some recommendations for the SFO. The first, which has long been debated in this Chamber, is the role of UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies as facilitators of economic crime and fraud. We asked the SFO for an estimate on the volume of fraud and economic crime that has a connection to the UK overseas territories, and we are waiting for an answer.

However, needless to say, it is common practice to use shell companies in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies to launder the proceeds of crime to facilitate tax evasion and avoidance. I commend the Government of Gibraltar, who have taken an important step towards publishing a transparent register of company ownership. A few weeks ago, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) and I met the Gibraltar premier. Our request is this: if Gibraltar can do it, why can the British Virgin Islands, Turks and Caicos, Cayman Islands and others not meet their obligations to Parliament on transparency over beneficial ownership? That will help us to follow the money, and it will help investigators in the SFO to bring successful cases.

The last deadline for the overseas territories was 30 April. That deadline was only set in the autumn, when we had the last joint council meeting, chaired by the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). Only two overseas territories met that deadline for enabling legislation on publishing information on beneficial owners. What consequences will there be for those that have not met the deadline, and what support can be provided to get those registries up and running so that our investigators can follow the money?

The second area in which I think the public expect more co-ordination is the proliferation of economic crime and fraud on our high streets. In Kensington and Bayswater, a number of constituents have contacted me

about our latest Harry Potter shop, souvenir shop, candy shop, barber shop, vape shop, nail bar and so on. Obviously legitimate businesses conduct those trades, but we know from the National Crime Agency's recent Operation Machinize on barber shops across the country that there is a significant link between economic crime and fraud and serious organised crime. There are serious organised crime links on our high streets, but also VAT avoidance and business rate avoidance from companies that phoenix. We need co-ordination across the enforcement agencies, with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the NCA and the SFO working together to enforce the law on our high streets. I think that a lot of our constituents would thank the Government for an additional push on that front.

I want to mention three areas where I think that the SFO could do with our support under its strong new leadership: first, on whistleblowing reform; secondly, on sustainable funding for disclosure; and thirdly, on enforcement on foreign bribery, which comes under the SFO.

First, I strongly welcome the SFO's commitment to progressing a new incentivisation scheme on whistleblowing. In the United States, such schemes have unlocked more than \$50 billion in recoveries, and significant numbers of UK whistleblowers have contributed tips to US authorities because the scheme incentivises them more than if they did so here. It is beyond time that the UK had a comparable mechanism, and I hope that the Government will look at ways to develop a properly resourced whistleblower reward scheme, subject to the outcome of the independent review by Jonathan Fisher KC on what exactly that would look like.

Secondly, despite recent progress, disclosure continues to consume a staggering portion of the SFO's capacity at approximately 25% of its budget and 40% of its staff time. We know that the SFO can be one of the most effective agencies in tackling financial crime, but that means we must properly fund and support it, including, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon mentioned, with modern technology. Independent reviews have already shown that disclosure remains an Achilles heel for the justice system, particularly in the prosecution of complex economic crime. Support in this area would go a long way.

Thirdly, there is a lack of enforcement on foreign bribery, in particular by UK small and medium-sized enterprises in developing countries. According to recent analysis, there have been zero successful prosecutions of UK SMEs for such offences since 2016, when the NCA's international corruption unit took over responsibility for pursuing that kind of bribery. That enforcement gap undermines the UK's credibility and efforts to promote clean business globally, and we want to support our SMEs to go out and make those deals in a fair and transparent way. The SFO must therefore be properly resourced and supported to take the lead in this area. The Government should ensure that there is sufficient funding for the SFO to take a lead role in prosecuting all UK firms who commit bribery overseas, including SMEs.

To conclude, the SFO must be supported to improve outcomes, with additional resources for trained staff, modern technology and digital disclosure tools. The responsibility now lies with us—with this Labour

Government, who have rightly put tackling economic crime at the heart of their agenda. The Foreign Secretary has said that we want to

"be the anti-corruption capital of the world", and I support that entirely.

Our APPG strongly supports the creation of an economic crime-fighting fund, which would allow enforcement proceeds to be reinvested into frontline agencies such as the SFO, which returned £3 to the taxpayer for every £1 invested. That is a sound investment for taxpayers and would help to ensure that the SFO is equipped to tackle some of the disclosure challenges that I mentioned, and to close the enforcement gaps on foreign bribery. I believe that the SFO is setting the right direction through its business plan and its newish leadership, and it is now for us to provide the funding and political backing to allow it to contribute to the UK's leadership on economic crime.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I intend to begin the winding-up speeches at 5.50 pm, and we have two more Back-Bench speakers, so it would be lovely if I could get you both in.

5.36 pm

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I will start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for introducing this important debate on an issue that affects so many across the UK. I would like to focus on the real human impact, and the effect that the crime can have on individuals.

Fraud is the single commonest crime in England and Wales, making up 40% of all crimes against individuals last year. That includes authorised fraud, where the victim is tricked into paying money into an account controlled by the criminal. Fraud of any kind is traumatic, but authorised fraud is not just a financial crime; it can feel like an emotional and psychological assault. One of its most devastating and insidious forms is romance fraud. Those fraudsters exploit loneliness and trust by building fake relationships and then vanishing with a person's savings, dignity and sense of security. Victims suffer a double hit: financial loss and emotional betrayal. The real damage is hard to measure, with 69% of fraud victims reporting a mental health impact, and more than a third saying that they have become less trusting of others.

Unlike victims of burglary or assault, many fraud victims do not see themselves as victims of crime. They blame themselves. They feel stupid. They are embarrassed. Lloyds bank found that 23% of people who lost money to fraud said that they were unsure whether what happened was even serious enough to report. That tells us something deeply troubling about how fraud is viewed and how society, including Government and enforcement, has downplayed it. It is not a clever ruse or a trick; it is exploitation, and the trauma it leaves behind is real.

That is why we must break the stigma around being scammed and take a victim-centred approach that recognises both financial and emotional harm, treating victims of fraud as what they truly are—survivors of an often life-altering crime. Our constituents are not just losing money; they are losing trust, and it is time we fought back, not just with systems, but with the empathy and urgency that will give this crime the attention it deserves.

5.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for leading the debate.

Economic crime remains a significant issue across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Worryingly, especially in the last few months, my office back home has heard almost every day about strange phone calls and strange texts, with people asking whether they are scams. If we get a phone call or a text message from a Nigerian general, we can be pretty sure it is a hoax, but most people are not being sent messages by a Nigerian general; they are receiving texts or phone calls asking what seem to be ordinary questions. More often than not, we are talking about vulnerable people—the very people that the hon. Member for Clwyd North (Gill German) mentioned—who feel under so much pressure. There is much work to be done on this wide issue.

It is important that I always give the facts from Northern Ireland. Fraud and economic crime are massive issues not only in my constituency, but across Northern Ireland. Between November 2023 and October 2024 there were more than 5,200 reports of fraud to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, with reported losses approaching £19 million. A mathematician could work it out, but £19 million divided by 5,200 is an excruciating amount of money.

Furthermore, in the 13 months leading up to January 2024, approximately £23.1 million was reported lost to fraud in 5,412 recorded incidents. We have a particular association with former paramilitary groups on either side of the divide in Northern Ireland, but they are really nothing better than just crime gangs—that is all they are. Their ideals went out of the window a long time ago.

Moneylending crops up all the time, as poverty levels are high and people are vulnerable. It is not unknown for some of the so-called “boys”, for want of a better description, to sit outside the food banks in my constituency waiting for vulnerable young women to come out with their children—those young women find themselves caught in a trap that they cannot get away from.

There are so many types of fraud, but I am increasingly seeing scam calls from illegitimate 07 numbers that most people assume are lawful and used with good intention. Most people are decent—99% of people are decent—so they assume those phone calls are genuine. If they are vulnerable and they are being offered help, they will be caught.

The hon. Member for Clwyd North mentioned romance scams; I know people back home who have fallen into that trap. In Northern Ireland specifically, there has been a dramatic increase in holiday scams. Fraudsters use holiday deals that would look appealing to anyone to try to get people's money. In 2024, a massive loss of almost £106,000 to this type of scam was reported to the PSNI, with most of them being advertised on social media. I am not technically minded, thank the Lord—my staff are, so they deal with these things. My wife, my children and, I suspect, my grandchildren are, but this old boy has not learned how to do it just yet—and sometimes it is good not to be able to do it, because there are scams out there.

Benefit fraud is also a real problem in Northern Ireland, and I welcome the Government's commitment to addressing it. The Department for Communities back home estimates that there were £240 million of overpayments in 2023-24—just think about that; it is massive—up from £174 million the previous year. I was shocked to see that statistic. Just think what good that money could do for our NHS, our Department of Health—the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as it was—or our education system in Northern Ireland. That money should be spent doing good, but unfortunately it is increasingly lost to fraud.

There is much more work to be done on addressing overpayments in the benefits system. The Minister is not responsible for that, but I hope she will commit to interacting with my colleague Gordon Lyons in the Department for Communities back home on tackling this. It is time we worked better together. Those are conversations that we should be promoting with the Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I look forward to what the Minister can say on that.

Fraud poses a significant threat to the livelihoods and prosperity of people in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the statistics show that the situation is getting worse. The hon. Member for Hendon is right to outline the issue and to state the facts, but the evidential base tells us that things are getting worse. If this is getting worse, it is time for a consistent and focused Government strategy to address it. I am always impressed in the House when we put questions to Ministers and they come back and say that all the regional Governments are working together. We need to work together on this one, because that is how we will address the issue.

Fraud accounts for some four in 10 offences against individuals. In addition to financial loss, fraud can cause emotional, psychological and health impacts, so more must be done. I look to the Minister for both her response and her commitment to raising awareness and protecting the financial livelihoods of the people who have worked hard for their money but find themselves in difficulties from fraud throughout this whole great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

5.46 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for securing this important debate. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) just pointed out, last year alone fraud accounted for a staggering 40% of crimes against individuals in England and Wales. This is not a faceless crime; behind every one of those statistics is a victim, someone who has been left not only financially worse off, but emotionally distressed, fearful and often devastated. Whether it is a vulnerable pensioner scammed out of their life savings or a small business misled into paying false invoices, the human impact of fraud is real and growing.

We have already heard about the devastating impact of romantic fraud, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Clwyd North (Gill German), and the hon. Member for Strangford outlined the increase in fraudulent calls offering things such as fake holidays. I have heard from

countless constituents in North Cornwall—hard-working people, whether they are pensioners or young adults saving for a first home—who have fallen victim to online fraud, authorised push payment scams and identity theft. They feel ignored, disempowered and unprotected. Far too often, they felt like the system just did not care. For them, justice feels out of reach, and that is because sadly, in most cases, it is.

Despite the enormous scale of this crime, only around 2% of recorded frauds are actually referred to local police forces for investigation. The vast majority of victims never see their cases taken forward, let alone justice done. That simply is not good enough. The Liberal Democrats believe that it is time to move beyond empty promises and underfunded initiatives and take bold, decisive action. We have set out in our manifesto a comprehensive plan to tackle fraud because we recognise it for what it is: a national emergency hiding in plain sight.

We would establish a dedicated online crime agency, a national body designed specifically to tackle online fraud, co-ordinate investigations across forces and employ the kind of digital expertise that is urgently needed to tackle cyber-enabled crimes. Right now, fraudsters exploit jurisdictional boundaries; they use fake identities, offshore servers and untraceable digital accounts. Victims in Cornwall, for example, might be targeted by criminals operating from London, Lagos or Luxembourg, and our existing systems are not designed to cope with that level of sophistication or scale. A specialist online crime agency could plug that gap.

The hon. Member for Hendon rightly pointed out how big banks need to seriously step up. We would name and shame banks with the worst records on preventing fraud and compensating victims. If we do not hold institutions accountable for allowing these scams to happen under their watch, nothing will change. In 2023 alone, criminals stole £1.2 billion from individuals through banking fraud and scams. While banks have improved reimbursement rates, nearly 40% of authorised payment fraud losses still go completely uncompensated.

While it is welcome news that, from October, payment providers will be required by law to reimburse victims of authorised push payment fraud, regulation alone will not be enough. We need pressure and transparency, so that banks feel real accountability to their customers. That is why we would launch a high-profile national fraud awareness campaign, giving people the tools to spot, report and avoid scams. The Government have a duty to act, but the public deserve to be better informed, supported and empowered.

Fraud prevention must be treated as seriously as fire safety, road safety or other forms of crime prevention. We should have national guidance for at-risk groups, and there should be a visible, accessible place to report crimes and get the help they need. Most importantly, we need to do more to support victims. The emotional harm caused by fraud, which has already been laid out by other hon. Members, is often overlooked, yet for many the betrayal, fear and shame of being scammed is as damaging as the financial loss suffered.

A constituent of mine who was the victim of such a devastating economic crime wrote to me of how it not only resulted in his farm business being “crippled”, but led to a detrimental impact on his livelihood, health and wellbeing, causing him worry, stress and severe depression.

He ultimately required counselling, and has since been identified as at high risk of suicide, has become a recluse, and suffers from

“a host of health issues with heart and blood pressure problems, bowel cancer, severe migraines”.

Ultimately, it has taken a huge toll on his physical and mental health.

Let me be clear: we cannot continue to treat victims of fraud as if they are to blame for their misfortune, or expect individuals to prevent it. Fraud is a crime—not a mistake or bad luck. It is a deliberate act of deception, and the victims, whether they are small business owners, retirees or university students, to name a few, deserve justice and redress.

That brings me to the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, currently making its way through Parliament. On the surface, it offers important tools to recover public money lost to fraud, especially in the welfare system, and of course every pound stolen through fraud is a pound not going to our schools, hospitals or those genuinely in need. However, the Bill as drafted lacks a comprehensive impact assessment. Without that, we risk placing enormous emphasis on clawing back money from ordinary claimants, without matching it with investment in the prevention or prosecution of high-level economic fraud.

What about the billions lost through covid support schemes? Let us not forget that under the last Conservative Government, fraudsters were allowed to get away with billions of pounds of covid support funds. Meanwhile, revenue worth an estimated £38.9 billion a year goes uncollected due to tax evasion and criminal activities. We need a clear, cross-agency, strategic and well-resourced national effort to tackle economic crime and fraud, and the Serious Fraud Office has a central role to play in that. The hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) has already called for a much more joined-up approach between the SFO, the NCA, HMRC and other agencies.

The SFO is the very agency tasked with investigating some of the most complex and serious frauds in the country, yet it remains under-resourced, underpowered, and far too often underperforming. We have seen well-publicised failures, with high-profile cases being dropped, poor conviction rates and concerns raised about its investigatory capacity. The SFO has been left to firefight with nowhere near the scale of investment it needs to pursue the most complex, high-value economic crimes.

If we are serious about tackling corporate fraud, money laundering and criminal networks exploiting our economy, we must give the SFO the independence and resources it so desperately needs. We need a Serious Fraud Office with teeth. That means increasing funding, improving oversight and ensuring that its leadership has the freedom to pursue complex cases without any interference. It also means ensuring that it works hand in hand with the National Crime Agency, local forces and international partners.

Fraud is not victimless. It targets the vulnerable and undermines trust in our financial systems. It is draining billions from our economy. I urge the Solicitor General and the Government to act—not just to reform the SFO but to lead a co-ordinated and compassionate national effort to protect our constituents from fraud and economic crimes. This Government and every Government have a

[Ben Maguire]

moral duty to offer more than token support. We must build a justice system that investigates fraud robustly, prosecutes it swiftly and protects those most at risk of harm. The people of my constituency of North Cornwall, and communities across this country, expect and deserve nothing less.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I call the shadow Solicitor General.

5.55 pm

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) on securing such an important debate, on an issue that affects all our constituents.

In our time in government we took decisive action to combat fraud, including benefit fraud, and economic crime. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we introduced the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022. That legislation enabled faster sanctions against oligarchs, and removed barriers to the use of unexplained wealth orders. In 2023, the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act received Royal Assent. That legislation further enhanced the UK's ability to target organised criminals and those seeking to abuse our open economy. New powers were given to Companies House to stop criminals using false names or registering companies with fictitious characters. The legislation was welcomed by many, including the Law Society and the Institute of Chartered Accountants.

In 2019, the Government published the economic crime plan 2019-2022. The plan represented a step change in our response to economic crime, and had 52 action points and seven strategic priorities. It was followed by the economic crime plan 2 in March 2023, which the hon. Member for Hendon assured me he has read in full. The second plan aimed to deliver real-world outcomes, and

"to cut crime, protect our national security, and support the UK's legitimate economic growth".

The Association of British Insurers called the plan "a landmark in the fight against economic crime."

In May 2023, the Government published a fraud strategy. It outlined the actions that the Government would take to further reduce fraud. It was especially welcomed by the Crown Prosecution Service and the City of London police for the additional investment it proposed. In February 2024, the Home Office announced that fraud had been reduced by 13% since the launch of the strategy.

Clearly, good progress was made by the Conservative Government during our time in office—but there is, of course, always more to do, so I have some questions for the Minister. I appreciate that she may not be able to answer them all today, given the time, so I would welcome her response in writing in due course.

What steps is the Minister taking to improve the number of prosecutions undertaken by the Serious Fraud Office and the speed at which those prosecutions progress? Is she confident that the SFO has the technical knowledge and digital technology for cryptoasset-related fraud? Does she agree that deferred prosecution agreements

should be used more frequently to ensure swift justice and financial resolution for victims? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the enhanced powers given to Companies House under the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act are effectively implemented? Finally, will she assure the House that her Government will maintain the important momentum established by the Conservative-led economic crime plans?

Tackling fraud and economic crime is about safeguarding the livelihoods of our constituents and businesses across the UK. We remain absolutely committed to ensuring that the UK is a safe place to do business and we urge the Government to build on the robust foundations that we laid during our time in office. We will continue to hold the Government to account and push for stronger enforcement, greater transparency and more effective prosecution of economic crime.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask her to leave a few moments for the Member in charge to wind up the debate and for me to put the Question.

6 pm

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) on securing this important debate on fraud and economic crime and the work of the Serious Fraud Office in combating those threats. The debate has been thoughtful and considered, covering different types of fraud and plenty of personal stories and experiences.

Fraud, bribery and corruption undermine economic security and prosperity, and undermine the very significant majority of people in this country who play by the rules. That is why the Government are so determined to stamp out such crimes and to support the SFO in its core mission. That is how we will protect our economic security and prosperity, as well as the reputation and integrity of the UK as a leading international financial centre. It is also how we will protect working people from the pernicious types of fraud that have been so aptly described today.

As my hon. Friend said, the economic crime landscape has been fundamentally transformed by rapid technological advancement. Criminals now exploit new and powerful tools, from cryptoassets that enable money laundering to AI-generated audio or images, that have fundamentally changed how we traditionally tackle fraud. Those new types of intricate scams acquire new victims, as he and my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd North (Gill German) mentioned. As has been covered already, the human suffering is heartbreaking.

Those changes in technology also bring us great opportunities to fight such crimes, as well as tools to do so more quickly and effectively. The environment demands constant innovation and growth, and I see that exemplified by the Serious Fraud Office, with the organisation's ambition to be bolder and more pragmatic as it continues and succeeds in tackling complex fraud, bribery and corruption.

As has rightly been acknowledged, the Serious Fraud Office is a highly specialist agency. It does crucial work to investigate and prosecute the most serious and complex cases of fraud, bribery and corruption, and it is the only

agency in the country to follow criminal investigations from cradle to grave—police, prosecutor and proceeds of crime, all under one roof. The SFO has a complex and challenging caseload, reflecting both the highly specialised work it does and the difficulty of accessing meaningful intelligence on some of the world's most sophisticated criminals. Its investigations are typically high profile and high risk, and they are invariably cross border, requiring sophisticated expertise and co-ordination.

Like my hon. Friends the Members for Hendon and for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), I am heartened to see a refreshed SFO that is taking significant positive steps forward under the strong leadership of the director, Nick Ephgrave. He is committed to a focus on using new tools, enhancing the SFO's intelligence capacity, and working with domestic and international partners—all furthering the SFO's ambition to be bolder and more pragmatic. During his tenure, the SFO has charged 16 defendants on 43 counts of fraud, bribery and corruption; announced 10 overt investigations; and arrested and questioned 22 individuals. Since 2020, the SFO has returned more than £1 billion to the UK taxpayer in penalties, demonstrating the impressive financial contribution it makes relative to its small running costs.

The organisation currently has 35 active criminal cases, in addition to civil cases, proceeds of crime cases and mutual legal assistance cases, which bring its total caseload to about 150. Earlier today we saw an example of the SFO's crucial work as it announced an investigation into Rockfire Investment Finance plc, relating to an alleged £400 million fraud against Thurrock council between 2016 and 2020. I saw the SFO's work at first hand when I accompanied it on an early morning raid as it searched five properties and made three arrests in relation to a new multimillion-pound international bribery investigation.

As I noted, recovering ill-gotten gains and returning money to victims and the taxpayer is a crucial part of the SFO's role. It is highly skilled at recovering funds under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: it recovered £160 million between March 2021 and March 2024.¹ In January, it successfully secured its first unexplained wealth order as it seeks to recover a Lake district property believed to have been purchased with the proceeds of a £100 million fraud—demonstrating that, wherever criminal assets have been hidden or dispersed, the SFO will explore new methods to recover funds for victims and the public purse.

It is vital that the SFO continues to adapt to the increasing pace of change and technological innovation. Part of that drive is being put into action with faster case progression, stricter case discipline, and the creation of capacity for more investigations through the SFO's "sharper, faster casework" initiative, as demonstrated by the fact that charges were brought in the Axiom Ince case only 15 months after the investigation was launched.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater spoke about financially incentivising whistleblowers. It is absolutely right that, in this environment, the SFO examines new and potentially transformative tools in the fight against fraud and economic crime, including the financial incentivisation of whistleblowers. That is clearly a priority issue for the director, and I note that Jonathan Fisher KC will be considering such incentivisation as part of his independent review of fraud.

As has been widely covered, fraud does not stop at national borders, and it is therefore vital that enforcement activities do not either—that is to say that, when criminals do not observe national boundaries, nor will enforcement. That is why the SFO makes co-operation with international partners a priority. It recently launched a new international anti-corruption prosecutorial taskforce with Swiss and French partner agencies that will strengthen the existing ties with those countries and lead to greater joint working on cases, as well as a greater sharing of insights and expertise.

The SFO will continue to strengthen its key international partnerships to ensure continued, robust enforcement against international bribery and corruption, because it is firmly in our national interests to do so.

Joe Powell: Obviously, there has been some concern about the US Administration's recent shift on the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Will the Minister assure us that the SFO is looking at the impact of that, where there is international bribery across jurisdictions? I am not expecting a political judgment about whether that is the right or wrong thing to do, but we must keep our eye on the impacts, particularly in developing countries.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that key point, and I can confirm that the SFO is keeping a close eye on it in the context of its other international partnerships.

Hon. Members rightly highlighted disclosure, which is another key area in which the SFO is driving forward change. Managing increasing volumes of data and complying with disclosure obligations have become increasingly challenging in the data-heavy cases that the SFO handles. In 2023, 25% of the SFO's operational budget was spent on delivering disclosure operations. The SFO is harnessing machine learning technology to enhance the efficiency of its disclosure exercises. Technology-assisted review has been successfully trialled on a live SFO case that is going through the courts, and it will be rolled out by operational divisions.

Given the importance of the SFO's work, I was delighted that in October the Government were able to confirm additional funding of £9.3 million for it, giving it a strong foundation to push ahead with work to deliver organisational objectives. I have talked about the SFO's role and performance in tackling fraud, bribery and corruption, but I also want to detail the action that the Government are taking more broadly to tackle the threats of fraud and economic crime. We of course take the threat of corruption, alongside illicit finance and kleptocracy, extremely seriously. As a nation with the utmost respect for the rule of law, and indeed for the importance of our security, the UK is leading the fight in addressing corruption.

That is precisely why the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor announced that the Government will publish a new anti-corruption strategy this year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater said. The Government are also developing an expanded fraud strategy, covering themes including enhanced data sharing, monitoring AI, tackling the impact of fraud on businesses and growth, and improving victim support and public awareness. We currently aim to publish that strategy, which is being developed by the Home Office, by the end of the year.

1.[*Official Report*, 23 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 2WC.](Correction)

[The Solicitor General]

The Government have also published guidance to support organisations in understanding the new corporate criminal offence of failure to prevent fraud. The SFO is committed to making full use of the offence once it comes into force in September.

Lastly, I will make three very brief points in response to issues raised by Members during the debate. First, I will explicitly note the Government's action to better protect taxpayers when it comes to public sector fraud in the form of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which it is estimated will save the taxpayer £1.5 billion over the next five years.

Secondly, with regard to the overseas territories, it is vital that we work closely with them to combat fraud, financial crime and money laundering, and on the enforcement of UK financial sanctions. We need to see greater transparency when it comes to company ownership, assets and real estate, which will be taken into account in the forthcoming anti-corruption strategy. Thirdly, I am more than happy to take forward the co-operation with Northern Ireland that was mentioned to deal with the very human side of fraud that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised.

In conclusion, it is clear that the world of fraud and economic crime continues to evolve rapidly, both in the UK and globally. It is vital that we adapt at the same pace to effectively crack down on this persistent threat to our economy and our prosperity, and that is something that the Government are 100% committed to doing.

6.11 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky: I thank you, Sir John, for chairing this debate and all hon. Members who have taken part in it for their thoughtful and stimulating contributions.

Given the time constraints, I will make just three observations about the points that have been covered today. First, this debate has thrown into sharp relief the

appalling and devastating impact of fraud. I was struck by the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd North (Gill German), who powerfully outlined the impact of fraud not just on individuals' finances, but on their mental health. She articulated a crucial point, namely that fraud is not just a crime, but a form of exploitation. Her points were powerfully echoed by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, as ever, was a forceful advocate for his area. He brought home to us not just the impact on individuals—it was really striking that everyone who spoke in the debate talked about the depth of that impact—but the particular dynamics in Northern Ireland.

My second point is that this debate has focused on a few key potential solutions. A number of Members talked about the massive progress that the SFO has made, and it is important that that progress is acknowledged—indeed, it was really cheering to hear from the Minister about the progress being made across a broad front. Many speakers also emphasised the importance of co-ordination between agencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) said how important it is that existing agreements are effectively enforced. I was also struck by the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) made that we must ensure consistency of enforcement.

My third observation—the key one—is that there has been real consensus in this Chamber about the devastating impact of economic crime and the absolute necessity of tackling it. I hope that we can build on that consensus as we collectively confront the challenge that we face.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Serious Fraud Office and tackling fraud and economic crime.

6.14 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 3 June 2025

TREASURY

NatWest Group: Government Shareholding

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): The Government are no longer a shareholder in NatWest Group—NatWest, formerly Royal Bank of Scotland—due to the disposal of the remainder of the Government's shares through the trading plan on 30 May 2025.

This concludes nearly 17 years of the Government being a shareholder in the bank and brings to an end the public ownership of banks resulting from the 2007-09 global financial crisis.

In total, the Government raised £24.8 billion in proceeds from sales of their shares in NatWest. Also accounting for dividends and other fees, the Government received a total of £35 billion in relation to their shareholding in NatWest. This is approximately £10.5 billion lower than the amount of capital originally provided to stabilise the bank. However, the Government believe that the cost of not acting to protect the economic and financial stability of the UK economy would have far exceeded £10.5 billion.

Policy rationale

The Government have been committed to returning NatWest to full private ownership, given that the original policy objective for the intervention in NatWest—to preserve financial and economic stability at a time of crisis—has long been achieved. The Government conducted sales of NatWest shares only when it represented value for money for the taxpayer to do so.

Format and timing of the final sale

The Government concluded that selling shares through the trading plan represented value for money. The trading plan, which was launched in August 2021 and was most recently extended in April 2023, has now ended. In total, the trading plan generated over £13.2 billion in proceeds from sales of NatWest shares.

Table 1: The net impacts of sales made via the trading plan on a selection of fiscal metrics are summarised as follows:

Metric	Impact
Net sale proceeds	£13.2 billion (total proceeds from sales of shares through the trading plan)
Retention value range	Within the valuation range
Public sector net borrowing	Nil There may be future indirect impacts as a result of sales made via the trading plan. Sales proceeds reduced public sector debt. All else being equal, sales reduced future debt interest costs for Government. PSNB will also be impacted by the loss of future dividends.
Public sector net debt	Reduced by £13.2 billion
Public sector net financial liabilities	Nil
Public sector net liabilities	Nil

Detail on the Government's shareholding in NatWest

Over the course of 2008 and 2009, the Government provided circa £45.5 billion to recapitalise RBS. This was done, as part of a series of interventions made by the Government in the financial sector, to protect ordinary savers and businesses from the collapse of a bank that was vital to the functioning of the UK economy and financial system. Allowing RBS to fail would have caused significant disruption to individuals and businesses who relied on the bank to provide their accounts, loans and mortgages. In addition, it would have risked causing a loss of confidence in the UK's financial system, potentially deepening the impacts of the financial crisis. As the Office for Budget Responsibility has stated, the costs of the financial crisis would almost certainly have been much greater in the absence of the interventions made to restore financial stability.

Since the global financial crisis, Government have implemented reforms to strengthen the ability to manage bank failures safely, and to do so in a way that protects the wider economy and minimises the need for taxpayer support. In addition, the development of a more robust regulatory structure ensures the resilience and stability of both individual firms and the wider financial system.

The capital provided resulted in the Government having an 84.4% shareholding in RBS. The Government sold shares through a combination of three accelerated bookbuilds (large block sales to market based investors), five directed buybacks (sales of shares back to NatWest), and a trading plan (which sold smaller amounts of shares regularly into the market). Sales took place only when it represented value for money for taxpayers.

Table 2: Details of all sales of the Government's shareholding are summarised in the table below:

Date	Sale method	Size of transaction	Proceeds
04/08/2015	Accelerated bookbuild	630 million shares	£2.1 billion
04/06/2018	Accelerated bookbuild	925 million shares	£2.5 billion
19/03/2021	Directed buyback	591 million shares	£1.1 billion
11/05/2021	Accelerated bookbuild	580 million shares	£1.1 billion
28/03/2022	Directed buyback	550 million shares	£1.2 billion
22/05/2023	Directed buyback	469 million shares	£1.3 billion
31/05/2024	Directed buyback	392 million shares	£1.2 billion
11/11/2024	Directed buyback	263 million shares	£1.2 billion
12/08/2021 to 30/05/2025	Trading plan	4,310 million shares	£13.2 billion
Total			£24.8 billion *Numbers may not sum due to rounding

Table 3: Explainer of total amount received by Government in relation to NatWest shareholding:

Type	Amount (£ billion)	Comments
Sale proceeds	24.77	Total combined proceeds from sales of the shareholding between 2015 and 2025.
Dividends	4.91	Total combined dividends received since the bank recommenced dividend payments in 2018.
Dividend Access Share	1.51	Combined value of payments made to retire the DAS, which provided enhanced dividend rights to HMT following the provision of capital support to RBS. The DAS was retired in 2016.
Asset Protection Scheme fees	2.50	Fees paid by RBS in exchange for its participation in the APS, which protected against exceptional credit losses on certain portfolios of assets. RBS exited the APS in 2012.
Contingent Capital Facility fees	1.28	Fees paid in return for the provision of an £8 billion CCF to RBS by HMT in 2009. The CCF was terminated in 2013.
Total	£34.98	
	*Numbers may not sum due to rounding	

[HCWS678]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Flood Resilience and Coastal Erosion Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The first role of any Government is to protect their citizens. Yet the previous Conservative Government left flood defences in their worst condition on record. This is a dereliction of duty.

Economic growth is the No. 1 mission in the Government's plan for change. Resilience and adaptation to climate change are essential foundations to this mission—better protecting all communities from the risk of flooding increases investor confidence, the viability of businesses, the resilience of critical infrastructure, innovation, and tourism. This is why we are investing a record £2.65 billion over the two years to March 2026.

We are committed to making every pound we invest count, and to ensuring that our flood resilience and coastal erosion investment policy enables new innovative approaches that respond to current challenges and prepare us for the future. Today, the Department has launched a consultation on reforming our approach to investing in flooding and coastal erosion for communities across the country.

We have a bold, strategic vision for the future. Our objectives are for the new approach to be simple, flexible, and strategic—so that we can deliver timely, data-driven interventions that build national resilience. It will have a stronger focus on investing in our existing assets and enabling a broader range of resilience interventions, including natural flood management and property flood resilience measures. It will be informed by a 10-year

pipeline of project opportunities based on the Environment Agency's new national flood risk assessment, which brings together key national and local evidence.

We want to ensure that funding for flood defences is distributed more effectively across the country—including for rural and coastal communities. We are proposing to stop using the current outdated funding formula entirely and replace it with a simple two-step process. The first step determines how much Government funding a project will get. We are proposing to fully fund the first £3 million of all projects and apply a flat rate of 90% Government contribution towards the remaining costs. This approach means that more schemes will see their funding gaps filled. It will make it simpler and faster for all risk management authorities to calculate their funding—benefiting all councils, including poorer councils that have less resource to commit to the application process.

We have also listened to stakeholders who have told us about their difficulties in securing external funding contributions for capital works to existing assets. We are therefore proposing to fully fund the refurbishment of existing flood and coastal erosion risk management projects to reduce these pressures.

The second step will be to prioritise projects for funding. We are seeking views in our consultation on a range of options, including prioritising by value for money; weightings to bolster priority outcomes, such as for deprived communities and natural flood management; and providing incentives for projects to secure additional external funding contributions.

The new approach for flood resilience investment will be launched in time for the start of our new flood investment programme in April 2026. Transitional arrangements will be put in place for existing projects in construction to ensure that all those projects are completed.

The Government are also opening a call for evidence on two wider areas. The first looks at how we can effectively find alternative sources of funding for flood and coastal erosion projects to achieve better outcomes for more stakeholders. The second explores opportunities for English devolution to support flood resilience, including how to deliver more local choice in flood risk management decisions and achieve wider benefits. It also invites views on the potential for mayors to help fund flood projects using mayoral revenue raising powers, on opportunities for improved partnership working and on the potential to devolve funding for local flood risk in the longer term.

We have recognised the challenges that our inherited approach to floods funding presents to communities across the country, including in rural, coastal and poorer council areas. This review of floods funding marks a step change in our approach to flood risk investment. Everyone with an interest in flood risk management—from local floods action groups and individuals to flood risk management authorities and private businesses—is encouraged to share their voice and help shape the future of floods funding.

[HCWS680]

Independent Water Commission

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): Today, the Independent Water Commission has published an interim report setting out its preliminary conclusions on water sector reform.

In October 2024, the UK and Welsh Governments appointed Sir Jon Cunliffe, former Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, to chair the commission and make recommendations to reset the water sector in England and Wales.

The Government set the Independent Water Commission a considerable task in reviewing the water sector in its entirety. Our water system must serve both its customers and the environment, but we inherited one that did neither. I thank Sir Jon for his interim report.

Today's report focuses on five key areas:

- Strategic direction and planning
- Legislative framework
- Regulatory reform
- Company structures, ownership, governance and management
- Infrastructure and asset health.

I remain of the view that transformative change across the water sector is needed. We need to create the conditions to attract future long-term investment, ensure resilient finances and contribute to economic growth, while supporting affordable customer bills.

The Government will review Sir Jon's interim findings in detail and look forward to receiving his final recommendations later this summer.

We will respond in full later this year following the commission's final recommendations. This will include a detailed transition plan for the water sector. This will form the basis of further legislation to reset the sector and attract the investment we need to ensure its resilience for decades to come.

[HCWS677]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK-Morocco Partnership and Regional Stability

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): I should like to update the House on the United Kingdom's deepening partnership with the Kingdom of Morocco, and our new position towards Western Sahara.

The UK and Morocco are long-standing partners, working together across a range of shared priorities. Our bilateral trade relationship is worth over £4 billion annually. We are strengthening this partnership to advance mutual goals in security, prosperity and sustainable development—delivering tangible benefits for British businesses and supporting the Government's plan for change to boost economic growth.

On 1 June, during my visit to Morocco, I announced a series of partnership agreements that unlock opportunities for UK businesses across a range of sectors, including access to public procurement markets in Morocco, where opportunities are estimated to be worth approximately £33 billion over the next three years. On behalf of the Department for Business and Trade, I signed a Government-to-Government partnership that strategically positions British businesses to compete for contracts to develop Moroccan infrastructure for the 2030 FIFA world cup. In addition, I announced closer UK-Morocco co-operation on migration and counter-terrorism, and joint action to tackle water scarcity and climate change.

In parallel, the Government are advancing regional security, stability and prosperity by supporting efforts to resolve the long-standing Western Sahara conflict, which has persisted for nearly five decades. The conflict has undermined regional stability and hindered economic development, and particularly affects Sahrawi refugees residing in the Tindouf camps.

Approaching the 50th year of the conflict in November, and with renewed international engagement, there is a window of opportunity to shift the dial on this intractable conflict, and to support the parties and the UN to reach a just, lasting and mutually acceptable solution, based on compromise, which conforms with the purposes and principles of the UN charter, including the principle of respect for self-determination. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is redoubling its efforts to help realise this opportunity.

To this end, while in Morocco, I announced the UK's endorsement of Morocco's autonomy proposal as the most credible, viable, and pragmatic basis for a solution to the conflict. In parallel, I welcomed Morocco's willingness, detailed in our joint communiqué, to engage in good faith with all relevant parties to provide further details on what autonomy could entail, with a view to restarting serious negotiations.

[HCWS675]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Re-organisation

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): On 24 March I updated the House on the latest steps on local government reorganisation. This set out the commitment that all areas had shown to reorganising local government in order to achieve sustainable, efficient and streamlined local government for taxpayers. We are shifting power out of Whitehall and delivering strong, sustainable, unitary councils, capable of leading their communities, shaping neighbourhoods and convening local public service providers to improve outcomes for local residents. This is part of the wider project to fix the foundations of local government, and to create a system that is fit, legal and decent, with improvements to audit, finance, standards and structures, complemented by devolution, fair funding and a resetting of the relationship with central Government to give councils the power they need to get things done.

All 21 two-tier areas produced interim plans with this Government's commitment to support them, including by giving feedback on interim plans, providing £7.6 million to support the development of final proposals and practical advice and support. I am now updating the House with a summary of the feedback provided to areas, and the proposed allocation and payment of proposal development contributions.

Proposal development contributions

In the statutory guidance I outline my expectation for all local leaders to work collaboratively and proactively by sharing information and data to develop robust and sustainable unitary proposals that benefit the entire area. Ideally, I would like areas to submit their final

proposals as a single submission, underpinned by a shared evidence base, that includes all options being put forward by councils.

Consequently, I expect proposal development contributions to support this effort. Each of the 21 areas will receive a flat rate of £135,000, plus an additional 20p per person based on the latest Office for National Statistics population estimates. The allocation is as follows:

<i>Area</i>	<i>Allocation</i>
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	£318,816
Derbyshire and Derby	£350,582
Devon, Plymouth and Torbay	£383,326
East Sussex and Brighton	£302,024
Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock	£514,318
Gloucestershire	£266,855
Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton	£542,174
Hertfordshire	£378,077
Kent and Medway	£514,410
Lancashire, Blackburn and Blackpool	£449,075
Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland	£365,888
Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire	£357,246
Norfolk	£321,389
Nottinghamshire and Nottingham	£369,754
Oxfordshire	£285,046
Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent	£367,336
Suffolk	£290,288
Surrey	£380,734
Warwickshire	£258,565
West Sussex	£315,172
Worcestershire	£257,837

Areas have been asked to agree on up to three councils to receive an equal share of the funding, which will contribute towards facilitating the development of a shared evidence base that will underpin the final proposals as well as contributing to the development of these. This includes areas sharing non-public data to ensure that all proposals are supported by the same robust evidence and analysis. This could include shared baseline data, which has been quality-assured, on key issues such as financial sustainability, service expenditure, impacts on outcomes, service delivery quality and potential changes in sources of income. This could be supported by a memorandum of understanding and a data-sharing agreement. The Local Government Association has published helpful data-sharing principles and a checklist that areas could utilise. The Department will be continuing to engage closely with areas as they develop proposals, to ensure that data is being shared as required. Shortly, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and F3 Consulting will also release a template to support the presentation of financial information in proposals. This template, or any future templates, are not mandatory, but I expect all areas to agree on the consistent presentation of evidence for their area, recognising that it may still be used to support a range of alternative proposals.

Once areas have notified their Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government area lead of the authorities to receive the funding, we will make payments

as soon as possible. If areas are unable to reach an agreement on up to three authorities to receive an equal portion of the fund to support the development of proposals across the area, or meet my expectations for a single submission and data sharing, we are ready to provide support.

Feedback and support

I know that areas are seeking further clarity on developing their full proposals. My officials have provided individual written feedback to each area and are in the process of meeting with areas to discuss that feedback. Areas have been encouraged to share that feedback with MPs. Today I am publishing a summary of the feedback to support all areas in progressing their proposals and in the interests of transparency; I will deposit a copy of that document in the Library of the House. Included in the feedback is a reiteration of the Government's position that a population size of 500,000 or more is a guiding principle, not a strict target. We understand the need for flexibility, especially given our ambition to build out devolution and take account of housing growth alongside local government reorganisation. All proposals, whether they are at the guided level, above it or below it, should set out the rationale for the proposed approach clearly. The approach that we have taken from the outset encourages and allows for councils to determine the right fit for their area. What works in one area may not apply in the same way in another, and so it is right that the process allows for flexibility.

Local government reorganisation should facilitate better and sustained community engagement, and I welcome the steps that areas are taking to consider how to maintain strong community voice. A simplified and standardised system of local area-working and governance is needed, and neighbourhood area committees, led by frontline ward councillors, are the best route to achieve this. Neighbourhood area committees support local authorities to deliver their commitments to community partnership working at a neighbourhood level. There are also opportunities to bring other service providers into broader membership of neighbourhood area committees—for instance, town or parish councillors, where they exist, and co-opted members from other local community organisations. This allows for the benefit of structural efficiencies from local governance reorganisation while deepening localism and engagement across every community.

The priority for the next phase is supporting areas to establish a shared evidence base that will underpin the development of final proposals, and to co-produce solutions to challenges identified by areas in this first phase—whether it is improved service delivery, funding reform, maintaining a strong community voice, achieving sensible geographies or preparing for devolution in tandem.

We are committed to working with colleagues across Government, and with the LGA and its sector support group, to ensure that councils have the information, tools and expertise to develop the solutions that are right for their area, so that new authorities are set up for success. No proposal will be perfect, but nor should we let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Local government has proven its adaptability and resilience, so the most important thing is that we establish new authorities that can continue to evolve and develop with their communities.

Surrey

I am pleased to inform the House that we received proposals for unitary local government from councils in Surrey, and I will provide the House with a full update shortly.

Conclusion

I understand that developing proposals and preparing for local government reorganisation is demanding, and that for areas with new councillors and leaders this is a particularly busy time. I want to reiterate my commitment to working with every area to deliver on this ambitious programme. I am also aware that developing proposals could distract councils from their essential day-to-day activities. However, residents and businesses depend on councils to provide vital services and continue the work necessary for creating successful new unitary councils. This is especially true for progressing local plans, to allocate land for the new homes that we so desperately need. Accordingly, as stated in my invitation letters, I continue to expect local planning authorities to work towards the adoption of an up-to-date local plan as soon as possible. Local government reorganisation should not hinder this essential work; and neither should the introduction of the new legal framework for local plan-making later this year, or our strategic planning reforms. Significant financial assistance has already been provided to eligible authorities to support plan-making, and I urge authorities to make the most of other support available through the LGA's planning advisory service. Together, we can ensure that our reorganisation efforts are successful and deliver the high-quality public services that our residents deserve.

[HCWS676]

TREASURY**Machinery of Government:
Cyber-security and Defence Exports**

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of Government changes.

I am today announcing that responsibility for Government and public sector cyber-security will move from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. This change will strengthen technology resilience and policymaking across the public sector by better integrating cyber-security responsibilities and expertise into the Government Digital Service. This change is effective immediately.

I am also confirming that responsibility for defence exports promotion—comprising the majority of UK Defence & Security Exports—will move from the Department for Business and Trade to the Ministry of Defence. In line with the defence industrial strategy, this will enable the Government to develop a single defence exports offer, driving a significant and sustained improvement to performance while giving stronger backing to our world-class defence industry. It will directly connect exports with the MOD's wider procurement and international activity. The creation of a single Departmental lead for defence exports will deliver on the Government's first mission of delivering economic growth as well as their first duty of protecting the UK. Responsibility for security and cyber exports will remain in the Department for Business and Trade. This change will take effect on 31 July.

[HCWS679]

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Points of Order [Col. 182]

Royal Fleet Auxiliary (Report on Commissioner) [Col. 183]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Jayne Kirkham)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Armed Forces Commissioner Bill [Col. 186]
Programme motion (No. 2)—(Taiwo Owatemi)—agreed to
Lords amendments considered

Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords] [Col. 213]
Lords message considered

Backbench Business [unallotted day]
Dementia Care [Col. 230]
Motion—(Caroline Voaden)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 279]

Yeovil Hospital: Maternity Unit [Col. 282]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Groceries Code Adjudicator [Col. 35WH]
Leasehold Reform [Col. 58WH]
Animal Welfare in Farming [Col. 67WH]
Inheritance Tax: Family-owned Businesses [Col. 94WH]
Serious Fraud Office [Col. 103WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 13WS]
